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Magic User

Reborn in Another World
as a Max Level Wizard

NOVEL

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"I appreciate the thought. *Falbolza!*"

"Gi-graah!"

Clara spoke her command—her incantation—in a clear, piercing voice. In response, an arrow made of fire sprang from the end of her staff.

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Seven Seas Entertainment



MAGIC USER: REBORN IN ANOTHER WORLD
AS A MAX LEVEL WIZARD VOLUME 2

MAGIC USER Vol.2

TRPG de sodateta mahotsukai wa isekai demo saikyo datta.
by MIKAWA SOUHEI / Ryota-H

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by

GENTOSHA COMICS Inc.

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MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-440-5

Printed in Canada

First Printing: May 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter 1

A STRANGE ENTITY that called itself the “Watcher” transported me, a humble businessman (Age: 42, Marital Status: Single), to the continent of Sedia in another world. To sweeten the deal, he gave me the ability scores of my character Geo Margilus, the magic user I painstakingly raised to maximum level in the obsession of my youth, the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Braves*.

A “fantasy world of swords and sorcery,” Sedia was plagued by monsters known as daemons, the bane of all humanity. Wielding my powers (if a bit apprehensively) as a great and powerful magic user, I successfully fought back the daemon menace. Yet for all my great strength as a wizard, I was still just a middle-aged man on the inside. I wasn’t prepared for the deluge of respect and admiration I got from the masses!

I resolved to protect the people of Sedia from daemonkind, standing tall alongside the friends I’d made in this world. What could be more appropriate than taking upon myself the mantle of the great wizard Geo Margilus?

But now that I’ve had some time to think about it, I sure did create a mountain of work for myself...

The village was being overrun by daemons. My party and I landed from on high, right in the middle of the town square. If we’d hoofed it from Relis like normal folk, it would have taken us three whole days to reach this secluded area in the mountains.

Contorted humanoid creatures with pitch-black skin and yellow eyes rampaged through what was once a peaceful village. These were a common breed of daemon called “imps.” In the center of the town square, there stood a small, stone church. The surviving villagers had barricaded themselves inside. Naturally, a horde of imps now surrounded it, screeching their ire and rage.

“Ngh...!”

I’d fought against daemons on numerous occasions. However, this was the first time I’d ever witnessed them attacking normal, everyday people.

“Help me!” cried a straggling villager.

“Gi-gree!” screeched an imp, its voice filled with malice.

Choking on the poignant stench of blood, I broke out in a cold sweat. Fear and apprehension gripped my heart.

“Gi-greee!”

“Greee!”

Mere seconds had passed since we dropped in from above, but daemons already swarmed around our party of seven. The lifeless bodies of villagers lay scattered across the ground, some sprawled right before my feet. As horrific a sight as it was to behold, at least we’d arrived in time to help the survivors. All I could tell myself was: *Thank goodness I took advantage of transportation spells like Fly and Phantom Horse to rush over here.*

“Gi-gree?!” An unnerving screech sounded overhead. A moment later, it was followed by a loud crash.

“Whoa!”

An arrow pierced all the way through the imp’s neck. The shot came from the roof directly behind us.

“Fall in around Margilus. Fijika, verify the situation in the church.”

“Got it!”

“Understood.”

The man who’d just displayed that god-like mastery with the bow—Sedam—was the leader of our band of adventurers. Even in these circumstances, he retained a level head. He probably intended to place me and Clara in defensive positions and then lure all the daemons in the village to us. It was in the daemons’ very nature to mindlessly attack any human their eyes fell upon. The moment Sedam issued the orders, his party members took action without missing a beat.

“I shall protect you, Lord Margilus!” Ted declared.

“They deserve no mercy!” Djirk snarled.

“May Ashginea be with you!” Torrad prayed.

Ted and Djirk, both of them warriors, planted themselves in the daemons’ path. Standing alongside them in silver armor was the warrior-priest, Torrad.

“Gi-gree!”

Just as Sedam expected, countless imps shifted their attention to us. And then they struck. They came upon us with crude stone axes,

with clubs and swords, even with farming tools they'd found somewhere. They swung wildly with anything that could pass for a weapon.

Imps possessed the physique of junior high children, but they were far stronger than their appearance suggested. Worst of all, no matter how many times they were slashed or stabbed, boundless malice propelled them to continue their relentless onslaught. It was difficult to fend each imp off with a single attack, even for the best warrior-priest and fighters that Relis had to offer. Nevertheless, the three stood like a wall before the charging imps—until Clara and I invoked our magic, striking them to the ground one after another.

“Hi-yah!”

“Your spells are incredible, Lord Margilus!” Ted exclaimed.

“Th-thank you,” I mumbled.

Djirk cleaved an imp clear in half, cudgel and all. Meanwhile, Ted slayed another imp in a single blow. They were capable of such feats thanks to the effects of *Physical Boost* and *Enchant*, fortifying spells that I'd cast on them before we arrived.

I had allies willing to protect me from even these bloodcurdling foes. Knowing my life was safe in their hands, I was able to breathe a little easier. Scanning my eyes across the battlefield once more, I contemplated what I should do...what spell I should use...

“Later!” Bound for the church, the scout Fijika lithely leaped over the imps' heads, propelled by the same *Physical Boost* I'd cast on the warriors. She was the very image of grace, effortlessly weaving around the clubs and axes the imps swung at her.

Clara shouted, “What about the other villagers?!”

“Good question...”

The voices of villagers who'd failed to reach safety could still be heard crying for help all throughout the village. Sedam only needed a moment to contemplate the sorceress's question before he came to a decision. “Margilus, you're up. Handle it.”

“G-got it!”

If this party had only consisted of adventurers native to Sedia, Sedam's order would have come across as a reckless abdication of responsibility. However, he knew that I was a great magic user, a wizard with powers never before seen in these lands. The ranger's fearless eyes and voice brimmed with faith in me. And for my part, I had something I was dead set on trying. *It just so happens that I know exactly which spell I'm going to use.*

“Open, Gate of Magic.”

My *D&B* character, Geo Margilus, was a max-level magic user—a peerless adventurer who’d attained the maximum level of 36. I could activate any of his magic simply by casting the corresponding spell. Unfortunately, the incantations required ten seconds of deep, unbroken concentration. For ten fraught seconds, I would be vulnerable...but I knew the adventurers would cover me.

“As a consequence of this spell, a platoon of six ogres will be created out of nothing, and for three days will follow my command. *Create Ogre Platoon.*”

Beyond the formation of warriors protecting me, the air began to warp. It reminded me of the way ripples spread upon water after a stone strikes the surface.

And from that rippling space, they came.

“Graaah!”

“Dang,” Ted cried. “Those things spook me every time!”

Towering over two meters, and encased in tough, reddish-brown skin, massive creatures appeared, holding battle axes and spears. Six of these humanoid monsters—these *ogres*—arrived, looking like they’d been taken straight from the pages of *D&B*.

Create Ogre Platoon was my favorite spell to use whenever I needed a few extra hands in battle. The muscles in Ted’s face grew taut at the sight of them, but they were more useful than words could describe.

“Spread out and protect the villagers,” I ordered. “Slay the daemons!”

“Grrr!”

“Groo!”

Ogres were capable of effortlessly defeating normal Sedian knights or soldiers. They also possessed enough intelligence to differentiate between daemons and villagers, making them more than capable of carrying out my commands. The six of them mowed down imps as they dispersed throughout the village.

I bet just one ogre could deal with somewhere between ten and twenty imps. I had one more charge remaining for *Create Ogre Platoon*. I wondered: *Should I use that to call for more reinforcements...?*

“I swear, your magic is absolutely confounding,” Clara whispered. A scowl overtook her as she watched the intimidating ogres carry out my instructions with the utmost loyalty. Sorcery was

the magic system native to Sedia, and she was a sorceress of rare talent. However, my magic and this world's sorcery utilized completely different principles. Going strictly by pure destructive capacity and versatility, wizardry was undeniably the superior art, and by a huge margin, at that.

"But sorcery is incredible in its own right," I said.

"I appreciate the thought. *Falbolza!*"

"Gi-graah!"

Clara spoke her command—her incantation—in a clear, piercing voice. In response, an arrow made of fire sprang from the end of her staff. The arrow cleanly struck the head of an imp lunging at Ted, setting the daemon ablaze. All of this took place within the span of a single heartbeat. If I'd tried to replicate that feat, the imp would have cleaved its stone axe into Ted well before I'd finished casting my spell. That was where sorcery truly outstripped magic: its speed.

"Huh...? Watch out!"

"Guoo!"

Sedam issued his warning at almost the exact same moment one of the ogres was sent flying from the shadows of a building.

"Wh-what the heck is that?!"

A giant silhouette, larger even than the ogre, jumped out after it. The daemon swung a corner post it had torn off some structure or other. With a single blow, it mercilessly bashed in the sprawled-out ogre's head.

"Gi-roooow!" Howling out with a metallic voice, the massive daemon lost all interest in the convulsing ogre and began plowing toward the church. Its great strides conveyed a sense of confidence. It knew the house of worship harbored defenseless prey. To make matters worse, the other buildings blocked us from its view, making it completely oblivious to our presence.

"Is that really a fiend?" Sedam wondered. "It's like none I've ever seen. Are they mutating somehow?"

Djirk grimaced. "Whatever it is, it's bad news!"

I agreed with the both of them. Boasting an absolutely enormous physique, and towering nearly three meters tall, fiends were a type of daemon that possessed a massive strength to match their monstrous frame. Normally, thick horns grew out of their heads, but the horns on this one branched out wildly like elk antlers. On top of that, hardened spikes protruded from its shoulders, elbows, and spine. All in all, the entire thing came across as "bristly." This *thing*, this living

abnormality, had over a dozen imps in tow. It charged toward the village's humble church like some kind of rampaging, two-legged dump truck.

Sedam shot me a sidelong glance as he felled several imps with his trusty bow. "That thing's under your jurisdiction, too, Margilus. Handle it."

"...Oh, right."

If something wasn't done, that fiend would smash down the church and everyone in it. There wasn't enough time to call back the ogres dispersed throughout the village. Instead, I picked out another spell to use.

"...Open, Gate of Magic."

"There isn't enough time for that!" As I began my spell, Clara dug her heels in next to me and thrust her staff into the air. "I'll handle this!" Another beautiful incantation sprang from her ruby lips: "*Falga Lans!*"

I guess this is a stronger version of the "Falbolza" she used earlier. Searing flames burst from the tip of her staff, converging to form a lance about two meters long. The fiery polearm left a crimson trail in the air as it hurtled toward the irregular fiend.

"Gi?! Grruuooowww!"

The fiend was probably so focused on the church sheltering the villagers that it had developed tunnel vision. Its back was turned toward us, completely unguarded, when the brilliant crimson flames of *Falga Lans* struck home. The fire spread across its hardened skin, quickly engulfing the fiend's entire body.

"Giiii! Gra-gaaah!"

"I-It's still moving?!" Clara squawked in frustration.

Falga Lans pierced the fiend's torso and set its body ablaze, yet that still wasn't enough to snuff the malice that fueled its massive body. Howling a battle cry of pure hatred, the fiend switched its focus to us. It charged straight ahead, wildly brandishing its makeshift club, now a giant torch. Naturally, its imp henchmen were right behind it!

"...As a consequence of this spell, a storm of razor-sharp hail and freezing cold winds will appear within a four-meter sphere. The damage of the storm will be determined by a 20d6 roll. *Ice Storm!*"

Even if Clara couldn't stop it, the time she bought me by drawing the attention of that fiend and its lackeys was by no means in vain. It allowed me to finish casting my spell!

Sorcery manipulated mana that existed in the natural world, but my magic called forth chaotic energy from a realm outside of it. The power of chaos strictly adhered to the spell's programming, altering reality precisely as I commanded. The irregular fiend was suddenly in the middle of a vortex of freezing cold winds, torn by razor-sharp hail.

“Gi-giiii?! Gi...!”

“It’s so cold! Wh-what is that?!”

The icy winds were so frigid that frost was forming even beyond the boundary of the spell. From our perspective, it looked like the fiend and imps were engulfed in a silvery dome that sparkled and whirled dangerously. Inside the dome, the daemons’ hardened skin was shredded by dagger-like hail, the shards dancing at a blinding pace. Icy winds swiftly froze, splattering flesh and blood alike.

“Giaaa!”

“Gwaaaa...!”

It didn’t take long for the sound of the daemons’ screams to come to an end. Consuming a radius of four meters, *Ice Storm* was probably only in effect for a few seconds. Once the storm dispersed, all that remained of the daemons’ corpses were scattered chunks of frozen meat. The pieces were so small it was impossible to tell what belonged to the imps and what belonged to the fiend.

“Ew...” I couldn’t help but gag at the horribly grotesque sight.

“This is on par with extremely high-rank ice sorcery,” Clara assessed. “No...scratch that, this is vastly more powerful...” Although her beautifully fair visage had gone as pallid as mine, apparently, it wasn’t for the same reason.

On paper, *Fireball* was just as powerful as *Ice Storm*, but I’d been concerned about the potential peripheral damage of the blast. Bearing that in mind, I’d gone with this spell instead. Seeing as *Ice Storm* was only a Rank 4 spell, it was relatively low-tier, considering that *D&B* went up to Rank 9... *I should probably keep that tidbit to myself, huh?*

Before long, we managed to exterminate all of the daemons in the village. Our arrival came too late for a great many people, but at least Torrad was able to use his divine sorcery as a warrior-priest to heal the wounded survivors. I also used the meager supply of healing supplies in my repertoire, contributing in what small way I could. Not that it dispelled the nagging thought in the back of my mind: *If only*

we'd gotten here sooner...

Amid the sense of despair that shrouded the entire village, I found myself in the church, now serving as an impromptu morgue. "I feel so awful when I think about it...what a difference a mere hour could have made..."

"You shouldn't fret too much over it," Clara said to me. I offered my respects to the row of bodies, hands pressed together. She held her hands against her bosom, offering the deceased a silent prayer of her own.

Not only a member of the aristocracy, Clara Andell was also a powerful sorceress. As a member of Sedam's party, she was an experienced adventurer—back home, she'd have been one hell of a career woman. And the icing on the cake? She was truly beautiful.

Gifted with splendid golden hair and a magnificent figure, her mere existence next to me was like a ray of light piercing through the gloom... It was amazing how the presence of a gorgeous woman was enough to change my outlook. *Honestly, men are simple creatures!*

"You did the best you could," Clara told me. "Your efforts did not go unnoticed by the creator-god Rimeydal, nor by the winter protector, Ashginea."

"I hope you're right."

As it was, word of the attack hadn't reached me until roughly an hour ago. On the other hand, the first daemon sighting near the village went back a good ten days. Then, two days ago, they'd initiated their assault on the village.

The village was affiliated with the city-state of Soler. After barely limping through the first attack, the villagers had naturally sought help from Soler's troops. Over an entire day was lost simply to the time it took for the messenger to reach the city. Although the Soleri troops were quick to make preparations to set out, something must have held them back. After all this time, there still was no sign of them.

The only reason we were even here was because my dear friend, the merchant Ild, just so happened to be in Soler for work. He'd used a high-speed ship to relay a message to me in Relis. I probably wouldn't have received the information in time if not for the advanced network of water transportation shared between the two cities on Lake Ryuse.

Upon receiving the message, I'd hastily recruited my nearby friends and used transportation spells to rush us to the village. *Thank goodness this happened when Sedam and the others were visiting Ild's store.*

If it hadn't occurred to Ild to inform me, the daemons probably would have killed every human in the village. The surrounding area would have suffered great casualties as well.

"What were the Soler forces doing this whole time...?"

I grumbled.

"The Sorcerers' Guilds and troops affiliated with the various cities in Ryuse are supposed to offer assistance whenever daemons appear. We're able to respond better than other regions since we can utilize Lake Ryuse for transportation and communication..." Clara dropped her eyes somberly. The people of Sedia had wracked their brains to devise and implement anti-daemon countermeasures of their own. Unfortunately, what they'd put in place was far from perfect.

"I guess no matter where you are, things never run as smoothly as you'd hope." I loosed a heavy sigh as I looked upon a statue of the winter protector, Ashginea. It was said she was a goddess who protected humans from daemons. The statue enshrined in the church showed her with a sword raised in one hand and a cloak grasped in another.

She looked down upon us in stone-carved silence.

Chapter 2

“**R**UMOR HAS IT the Daemon Killer was here in this village,” Sedam said, sharing a tasty morsel of information he’d obtained from the villagers.

“Really?”

From what I’d heard before, the Daemon Killer was a “heroic-ranked” warrior who traveled the land single-handedly slaying daemons. If memory served correctly, his name was Lade.

“That’s amazing!” Ted paused, and then wondered, “But if he was here, where did he go...?”

“He repelled the daemons in the first wave on his own,” Sedam explained. “This morning he claimed that he was going to attack their lair and set out.”

In other words, the group of daemons that attacked the village must have come shortly after he’d left.

Djirk was aghast. “Is that true?! If it is, isn’t he biting off more than he can chew?”

Sedam shook his head. “It was ages ago, but I’ve actually seen the Daemon Killer fight, even if it was from a distance. I’ll have you know that the man cut down a fiend right before my eyes.”

I still hadn’t seen any warrior—let alone single-handedly—defeat a fiend on the battlefield. If that was true, he would make an incredible ally...

“For there to be so many daemons, do you think a nest is somewhere in the area? No matter how impressive he is, that would be a bit much for anyone to handle alone...”

The presence of a nest weighed heavily on me. Memories of the fierce battle fought a month ago flashed across my mind. Together with Sedam’s party and the Calbanera Knights, I’d descended into the center of the nest, where a strange orb gave birth to the daemons. A jet-black, spherical mass, it was powerful enough to defeat the small red dragon I’d summoned in a single strike.

“I think he stands a fair chance, but we should go lend him a hand.” Sedam leaped at the chance for more adventure without the least bit of hesitation.

“I second that—Ah!” In the midst of agreeing with Sedam, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

“What’s wrong?”

“It just hit me, but you and the others aren’t getting paid for this, are you? I’m sorry it didn’t occur to me sooner. I’ll cover your fees,” I offered apologetically.

I’d already sworn to myself that I’d use the vast powers I’d been given in this world for good. I felt certain that the greatest good I could do was thwart the daemonic threat. But regardless of my personal oath, Clara, Sedam, and the others were professional adventurers who fought on commission. Emergency or not, it was inappropriate to drag them out here and expect them to fight without discussing fees first.

“It’s not like this is a first for you,” Clara pointed out.

“True enough! You had every intention of bringing us along when you heard what was happening here,” Djirk pitched in, “fee or no fee.”

“Ouch! Y-you got me there...”

Clara and Djirk were absolutely right. I found myself rubbing the back of my head in embarrassment. This was about as far from the image of a “great magic user” as I could possibly get.

“Don’t worry about it. Exterminating daemons is a top priority for us adventurers, too. If we make sure to file the paperwork, we should receive back pay from Relis.” While Sedam explained, Djirk and the others nodded in agreement.

“R-really? I’m glad to hear it.”

Naturally, I knew that it was just as Sedam said; they hadn’t come simply to line their pockets. Yet at the same time, it was reassuring to hear them confirm that they found protecting folk from daemons a noble calling in and of itself.

Truthfully, the mere existence of a bounty system proved just how close to home the daemon threat was to the people of Sedia.

“My duties as a noble and sorceress take precedence over those of an adventurer. Regardless of whether I am compensated or not, it is my obligation to protect the people from daemons.” Clara spoke with practiced hauteur, her ample chest puffed up proudly.

“...I’m impressed,” Djirk whispered.

“Whoa!” Ted shaded his eyes, looking ahead. “Do you suppose

the Daemon Killer did this all on his own?"

Thanks to Sedam and Fijika's amazing tracking skills, following the Daemon Killer's trail was a breeze. After a certain point, we basically just had to follow the trail of hacked daemon corpses left in his wake. Within a few hours of climbing through mountain bush, we came to the gaping mouth of a cave. There were even more daemon corpses littering the ground outside.

Ted knelt to check one of the bodies. "He cut each and every one in half with a single slash."

"He'd need to throw a great deal of momentum behind a truly monstrous sword to halve them cleanly like this," Djirk said, analyzing another.

"As I recall, the Daemon Killer's weapon of choice is indeed a greatsword," confirmed Torrad.

The warriors in our party sounded like they were in a period drama or old police procedural. They pointedly ignored my struggle not to let the vile stench and grotesque sight of gore upend the contents of my stomach. It was just as they'd said; the majority of the daemons were, in fact, cleaved through. It was merely a question of whether they'd been bisected horizontally or vertically. Why, there was even a fiend cut clean across the waist. Clearly, this "Daemon Killer" was an abnormally powerful warrior here in Sedia.

To make a long story short, we ultimately failed to find the Daemon Killer. The depths of the cave held nothing but a mess of daemon corpses. There wasn't any indication a daemon nest was ever there, either.

Just to play it safe, I used a spell to conjure up some monsters with high intelligence and maneuverability, then ordered them to search the area. They didn't come across any more daemons, or anything resembling a nest. So far as we could tell, this was just a splinter group.

By the time we returned to the village, the Soleri troops had finally arrived. Boasting nearly a hundred heavily armed soldiers, they appeared...*reasonably* strong. The soldiers devoted themselves to healing the injured and aiding with reconstruction of damaged homes,

but fear crossed their faces whenever their eyes fell upon the ogres I'd left to guard the village, or upon the remnants of the daemons I'd defeated with my spell. On the other extreme, the villagers prostrated themselves upon the ground the moment they noticed me.

At any rate, the captain of the troops soon sought to treat with me. "Would you be the Great Sorcerer, Lord Geo Margilus?" he asked.

"...If you mean the great *wizard* Margilus, then yes, I am he." I wore a stern expression, striving to play my role to the utmost. A great magic user ought to emanate power and dignity.

News of how I'd collaborated with the Calbanera Knights to destroy a daemon nest should have reached Soler by now, not to mention how I'd defeated a daemonist in Relis. Yet despite his knowledge of my great feats, the captain came across oddly cold.

"Oh? Well, at any rate, you have my gratitude for coming to this village in its time of need. I see your power is as incredible as the rumors claim. But I never dreamed...er..."

"Do go on," I prodded.

"I never dreamed you could *control* daemons! And fiends, at that..."

"No. I cannot do anything of the kind. You've entirely the wrong idea."

To be fair, fiends and ogres looked remarkably similar. Then again, anything under the category of "large humanoid monster" was bound to share some similarities. *Come to think of it, didn't Mora warn me to be careful about summoning monsters for this very reason?*

"I-Is that a fact? There is another matter I must discuss with you. As much as it pains me to say this, I'm afraid..." The captain hesitated.

"Yes?"

He apologetically explained that the Soler City Council had decided against offering me and my fellow adventurers any form of compensation for our work exterminating the daemons here. The basis for their decision was that we had not been commissioned by the city. *I don't really care about the money, but that doesn't seem right...*

I eyed the captain. "I'm sure this isn't the case...but do tell me. Your late arrival didn't have anything to do with the council bickering over how to deal with *me*, did it?"

"Ugh...! I'd be lying if I claimed that didn't contribute to the delay," he answered reluctantly.

When Ild had sent the message to me, he'd also informed the Soler City Council that "the great wizard Margilus will probably go to assist the village." That level of correspondence fell into the realm of common courtesy. There was no way of knowing it would become the source of such tumult.

"None of the people in positions of authority know you well in Soler. They were suspicious of your motives and second-guessed you. On top of that, the typical power struggles between factions in the city council were undoubtedly at play." Clara sounded sympathetic as she explained the politics of it all.

The captain, for his part, seemed genuinely apologetic. "...I'm afraid it's exactly as she says. Some members of the council even believe relying on you will put us in debt with Relis City..."

For these city-states, dispatching their troops was a matter of grave consequence. It was not the sort of thing one or two big shots could decide on a whim. It was asking for too much to expect them to bend the rules for an anomaly like me. *Even so, they're being ridiculous!*

"...Please don't worry about the compensation," I said. "But when you return, I would appreciate it if you relayed a message to the people of Soler on my behalf. Tell them the wizard Geo Margilus is an ally to all who fight against the daemons."

"Certainly! I swear to deliver your message, just as you've spoken it."

By the time our conversation drew to a close, the captain's expression was somewhat softer than when we'd first met. At least to some degree, I had managed to earn his trust and respect. He even went so far as to promise that he'd personally inform me the next time he received word of a daemon attack. If I'd taken the time to forge relationships like this in Soler earlier, the city council might have been quicker to dispatch the troops.

There was great fanfare as the adventurers and I left the village. The soldiers stood at attention and saluted while the villagers once again prostrated themselves. Parts of this escapade weighed heavily on me, but there were several important lessons for me to take home. *I need to figure out how to make the most of what I've learned here.*

Several days passed after the incident at the village. I was still a guest at Ild's home in Relis. The Calbanera Knights might have bequeathed me a castle, but in the meantime, I needed to gather all

the things that would make the place livable, from furniture to staff.

“Okay!” Mora held up a fist. “So, next on the agenda is buying ingredients for Mister Geo’s dinner!”

“Very good, Lady Mora!”

“We’re going to include a fresh vegetable salad today,” Mora went on, “and Mister Geo won’t eat his salad without dressing, so we’ll have to visit several spice vendors!”

“Understood, Lady Mora!”

Ild’s home was an impressive three-story mansion with a front yard. Standing in the entryway was a girl with chestnut hair, busy shouting orders at four young ladies in maid dresses, like some kind of drill sergeant.

The girl with chestnut hair was Mora, the only daughter born to Ild, the master of this fine home. Her adorable face radiated cheer, even now, when it was scrunched up in fierce determination. Not only was she the first person I’d had any real interaction with upon arriving in Sedia, Mora was also the first person to trust me.

The line of young maids stood perfectly still, all of them showing the dark brown, nearly black skin unique to dark elves. I liked to call them the “Four Dark Elf Sisters.” The oldest was the good-natured Argha, with her shoulder-length hair. The second oldest was the strict Racil, who always wore braided pigtails. The third sister was the taciturn Gilma, sporting a pixie cut. And the youngest was the bubbly Sasara, whose hair was cut short. Truth be told, they weren’t actually sisters. Yet as women raised in the same tribe, the bonds they shared were as strong as any true-blooded siblings.

There was a time they’d been forced to commit heinous deeds under the control of the daemonist Baron Corbal. Released from his brainwashing, thanks to one of my spells, and proclaimed innocent in their subsequent trial, they were by all rights free women. Yet for some odd reason, they adamantly insisted on referring to me as their “Olry” and serving as my “Si.”

Seeing as I was the one responsible for making them think of me as their Olry, I couldn’t just cast them away. As a result, I officially allowed the four sisters to work under me as my servants along with Reyhanalka Haiklus Si—or Reyha for short. Reyha had become my Si shortly before them. Technically, they were servants, but I personally liked to think of them more as my five dependents.

It seemed like all of the issues had been ironed out, but in reality, I didn’t have any tasks at the moment that required the skills of highly trained assassins. Still, I couldn’t very well allow five more

people (dark elves, whatever!) to play all day when I was already a guest in another man's abode. Bearing that in mind, I'd decided to have them work as maids for the duration of our stay at Ild's home.

Born to the Haiklus tribe that specialized in sabotage, these dark elves had learned basic housecleaning as part of their training. But they were no match for Mora, who'd run the whole household ever since Ild's wife died several years ago. Not only was Mora a master of housework, it was painfully obvious that I doted on the young lady. Seeing this, they'd started to refer to her as "Lady" Mora.

And the newly minted lady was in her element. "I want Argha and Gilma to go to the market! You're in charge of getting the vegetables, cured pork, and red wine vinegar for the salad!"

"Okay," Argha replied languidly.

"Yes, milady!" Gilma answered crisply.

"Racil, search the port vendors for ingredients to go in the soup. If they have Ryuse shrimp or black abalone, get it!"

"Understood."

"Sasara, search the spice vendors with me!"

"Okay, sure!"

Mora did a fantastic job taking the four sisters' personalities and relationships into consideration when delegating their tasks. *My influence alone isn't enough to make a pack of extremely deadly assassins happily obey an ordinary girl's orders. Mora did this all on her own.*



As for Reyha, the leader of the four sisters, she constantly took a position either behind me or somewhere out of sight, under the pretext that she was “guarding” me. *She is standing guard, isn't she?* Doubt suddenly getting the best of me, I quickly spun around.

“Do you have need of my services, Master?” Reyha knelt, head lowered. I hadn't even heard her move into position, let alone sensed she was there!

“No, all is well. But, uh, I wanted to make sure you know it's all right to take some breaks,” I said. “Don't push yourself too hard, okay?”

“S-such benevolence...! I am most grateful! But as your loyal Si, all I desire is to serve you, Master, and follow your orders. I dare not take a moment for myself.”

“R-really? W-well, just be careful not to push yourself too hard...”

Reyha had nearly black skin, pointed ears, and purple hair. She was a beautiful woman with alluring eyes as sharp as daggers. Her horribly revealing black leather armor, which somewhat resembled a bondage suit, was regrettably flattering on her marvelous figure.

This dark elf was more than just eye candy. I could use the spell *Sense of Adept* to roughly convert the abilities of Sedians to the system used in *D&B*. According to the spell, Reyha's abilities were equivalent to a Level 20 rogue. Seeing as someone who was only a Level 6 rogue was considered a skilled scout at the Adventurers' Guild, it was safe to say she could be classified as “heroic-ranked.” (For the record, the four sisters were right around Level 10, give or take a level or two).

To think such an amazing woman totally hangs on my every word! What man wouldn't enjoy that? And if I said I didn't have a few inappropriate fantasies about her, I'd be lying. But honestly...it's not as if she loves me for my own merits, or my personality...

With a belly full of bouillabaisse loaded with fish and shellfish, plus a salad topped with thick dressing, I welcomed the following day. I paid a visit to the chairman of the Relis City Council, Zato Brauze, at his mansion of a home. He was just the man to speak with regarding the recent fiasco at the village. We needed to figure out the best way to handle anti-daemon countermeasures going forward.

“First, I wish to thank you for protecting the people of Ryuse.” The very first thing out of Brauze's mouth upon hearing me recount

the village incident was respectful gratitude. Since he represented Relis, what transpired in a village under Soler's jurisdiction was technically none of his concern. For him to nevertheless show such earnest appreciation spoke volumes about his upright character. And the fact that he didn't go so far as to offer any compensation showed that he was also a realist with his feet firmly planted on the ground.

Throughout my various dealings with Brauze, I'd learned he was a wise politician and a seasoned merchant. That was precisely why his assistance was absolutely necessary.

"I only did what any magician would... But that having been said, it has become evident to me while fighting the daemons that there are some issues that need to be addressed."

"I can see that," agreed Brauze. The sight of the stately chairman nodding gravely in agreement with my fumbling attempt at sounding collected made a knot form in the pit of my stomach. Speaking with talented individuals in positions of power always wore me out. It was still difficult for me to assume the mask of the "great magic user."

"If possible, I would like to receive any information on daemon sightings straightaway."

"Uh-huh..."

There were bound to be more daemon raids in the future. If word of the attack was delayed each time, lives that could have been saved would be lost. I hoped to draw on the trust of the people in the Ryuse Alliance to create an information network with me at the center, but it might be trickier than I'd expected...

"I am naturally in favor of this proposal for Relis. I can advise the other city-states to accept as well, but..." Brauze hesitated.

"Do you foresee a problem?"

"Yes. Several."

Truthfully, I'd somewhat expected this after my conversation with the captain in that village. Brauze's explanation proved my fears were well-founded.

"You may have already noticed, but opinions about you in the cities of Lake Ryuse run the gamut... On one extreme, some towns consider you a great hero, but on the other...well, they think you're a fraud."

"A fraud...? Uh, well, those views certainly are polar opposites," I agreed.

It wasn't as if Sedia possessed any method of mass communication like the internet, television, or radio. Nearly all of the

information people received was passed on by travelers, especially merchants and entertainers. (And as inefficient as it seemed, I'd heard that news actually spread quicker in the Ryuse Alliance than it did elsewhere, thanks to its burgeoning water trade.)

In a world with such limited communication, hardly anyone with half a brain would believe stories along the lines of "a great magic user summoned down meteors on a daemon nest" or "a mighty wizard mobilized a small army to find and defeat a daemonist." After all, they hadn't even heard of "wizards" before, let alone the kind of magic I possessed.

"That certainly complicates matters," I muttered.

"I'm currently discussing this with some prominent figures in the other states with whom I am personally close. While there are some who are leaning toward forming an alliance with you, it's hard to say in which direction their city will ultimately swing."

The chairman's explanation made me want to pull out my hair in frustration. *Well, at least not everyone is calling me a fraud. Apparently, some hail me as a "great hero," so there's still hope.*

"That is not all, master wizard. There is concern among some of the cities that...backed by your power...Relis City intends to expand its influence..."

Thinking back, the captain had implied something along those lines as well. Looking at it from their perspective, I could certainly see how other cities might come to that conclusion. *Those who don't believe I'm a great magic user will assume I'm a fraud. And on the off-chance they do believe in my magic, I would be nothing short of terrifying if they didn't trust me personally.*

"As much as it pains me to say this, there are people here in Relis who have grave misgivings about you as well. In fact, there are cases of your name being used during negotiations to coerce unfair trade deals."

"They what?!" I croaked, glaring up at the ceiling in dismay. *I swear, that's low!* Anger and disgust welled within me, but at the same time, part of me wasn't surprised. Fantasy setting or not, this was still a world populated by living, breathing people.

"Naturally, I made sure anyone caught doing that will be strictly reprimanded," Brauze assured me.

"I appreciate it..."

Going by Brauze's frigid tone, I suspected the "reprimand" would be particularly harsh.

“And here all I want is to deal with the daemons,” I grumbled, the words slipping out before I could catch myself.

“Lord Margilus, I realize this is inappropriate to say to Relis City’s great benefactor,” Brauze began somberly, “but if you truly wish to devote yourself to protecting all of Ryuse—no, humanity—from the daemons, it would be best if you lived in your own castle.”

“My own castle?”

“In other words, you should establish your own independent dominion rather than tethering yourself to Relis, the Ryuse Alliance, or any single power in Sedia,” Brauze elaborated, his voice carrying a certain persuasive edge.

My own dominion, huh? I can see what he’s getting at. As things stood, I was like a single rogue individual carrying around a portable nuke. But if I became the lord of a castle...perhaps the masses would view me in a different light.

“Didn’t you have plans to move into the castle that the Calbanera Knights gave you? I believe settling down there and working to earn the trust of the nearby cities may ultimately prove the quickest way of achieving your goal.”

“Hmm... I appreciate your advice,” I mumbled.

When I first decided to fight for the sake of Sedia’s people, I came up with two approaches to handle the extermination of daemons. One was to form an anti-daemon military alliance, and the other was to build an independent anti-daemon force. Forming a military alliance would require the trust of all the different countries. In order to earn that trust, I needed to build my own independent organization first.

It goes to show I still haven’t let go of how I viewed things when I lived in Japan. It never even occurred to me that I’d need a “stronghold” to build my organization. I guess a rental office around the corner won’t cut it, huh? If I can’t rent an office...that castle, Castle Getaeus, is just what I need.

I thanked the chairman for his time and left his mansion. Still unaccustomed to the idea of calling for a carriage, I wound up walking back to Ild’s mansion. Along the way, I heard countless voices call out “Protector of Relis!” and “Lord Wizard!” With those voices came smiles filled with great respect. On the other hand, there were a considerable number of people who scurried away or openly glared at me with contempt.

Well, jeez! I guess maybe magic users really aren’t meant to live in cities or towns, after all.

Chapter 3

THE NEXT DAY, I was scheduled to meet with the Sorcerers' Guild. Clara and a young sorcerer I'd never met before were waiting to welcome me when I arrived. I'd traveled by carriage—Ild had insisted.

"Wow! So, you're Lord Margilus? I'm Tasim, the fourth seat," said the gangly young man in a somewhat high-pitched voice. It was rare to see someone in Sedia wear glasses...

I'm not sure why, but I get the feeling he's the type who means well, but can't pick up on social cues. There were a bunch of guys like him in my old tabletop group back in college.

"Heridol is still out attending to another matter," Clara told me. "Would you mind waiting here for a while?"

"Oh, please do," Tasim exclaimed. "You could show me some of this strange magic of yours while you're killing time!" Uninhibited to the point he didn't even notice Clara's icy glare, Tasim, and his overly friendly demeanor, was like a breath of fresh air. *I guess all those eyes constantly judging me were starting to fray my nerves.*

Not only did I take a shine to the lad, I figured Clara and the other sorcerers undoubtedly shared his curiosity. Bearing this in mind, I answered, "Very well. I shall stay and show you my magic."

"Excellent! Then let's go to the training grounds!" Tasim exclaimed excitedly.

Sorcery in Sedia was a special ability that required the caster to control mana that existed within his body and the natural world. All sorcerers were capable of seeing a "sorcery frame," which not only revealed their mana reserve, but also what spells they could use.

On the other hand, my magic was the art of drawing chaotic energy from beyond this reality. In order to do so, I had to pass through the Gate of Magic constructed in my inner world to delve into the chaotic realm.

For the record, the mana used in sorcery and the more chaotic mana used in my magic referred to two completely different kinds of energy. For simplicity's sake, the guild and I had decided to refer to mine as "magical power."

If I investigate the rules behind magic and sorcery, perhaps I could uncover part of why the Watcher transported me to this world.

Aside from that, one other thing was weighing on my mind. Inside the daemon-spawning nest, I'd found something that closely

resembled my Gate of Magic.

All in all, there is a great deal I must learn.

We relocated to the training grounds, a spacious room the size of a small sports field. Of a mind to sate Tasim's curiosity, we dove into the "experiments" straightaway.

"Keep it as small as possible, okay? Don't put all your might into it," I pressed.

"I know!" Clara snapped.

A thin, misty white barrier covered my entire body, including the arm I held out. The barrier was created by the Rank 9 spell *Invincibility*. According to the *D&B* rulebook, the effects of the spell "nullified the attacks of low-level magic and normal weapons." But when I was on the receiving end of the offensive sorcery spell *Icia Bolza*, the barrier failed to block its ice arrow. Ever since, I've simply assumed that my magic couldn't block sorcery. However, when he heard about my past experience, Tasim insisted we put it to the test. That was how I got stuck waiting for Clara to unleash a fireball at my arm...any second now.

"Falbolza Jeera!"

"Ouch!"

A fireball about the size of my pinky finger shot from the end of Clara's staff. Despite its small size, the flame mercilessly broke through my barrier and burned my upper arm.

It's like a cigarette burn... Although I'd never had to suffer such cruel brutality, I suspected the jolt of pain in my arm felt pretty similar.

"O-oops! Sorry about that!" Clara apologized, sounding surprised.

"I told you it wouldn't work," I grumbled.

"Now, now. Just remember the valuable information we're obtaining from this," Tasim reminded me. "Thank you for your cooperation."

The small burn vanished without a trace, thanks to the potion I drank, but it did nothing to wipe away the nasty glare I was shooting at Tasim. Not that it ruffled the young sorcerer's feathers any.

After that, I created ogres, summoned elementals, and

demonstrated a wide array of spells. In exchange, I had Tasim and Clara show me some of their sorcery.

Our findings from the various experiments were more or less as follows: I couldn't use *Dispel Magic* to nullify a stone pillar created with sorcery. However, I could use *Destruction* or *Mana Bolt* to destroy the aforementioned pillar. Even if I used *Analyze*, I still couldn't see the mana native to Sedia—and we already knew that sorcerers couldn't see my magical power.

From the look of it, magic didn't differentiate between stones or fire created by sorcery and their counterparts in the natural world. While *Invincibility* could nullify a magic-based attack like *Fireball*, it would dismiss the sorcery equivalent, *Falbolza*, as just the flames from a torch or forest fire.

We discovered another huge difference between wizardry and sorcery: spell duration. All of my spells could only last for a designated period of time known as their "duration." But notably, there were exceptions to this rule, such as *Wall of Stone*. A stone thus created never disappeared. Then there were spells with permanent duration, such as *Permanent Light*.

Sorcery, on the other hand, didn't possess *any* spells that lasted perpetually. There were incantations to create defensive stone pillars or walls of ice, but they were only sustainable for a brief period. Generally, after a few minutes, they would "return to mana."

"In other words, sorcery could be described as the art of sorcerers exerting their will to temporarily transform mana into different substances," I summarized.

"That sounds about right. It's common sense for us sorcerers, but after seeing how your magic isn't necessarily transitory, I'm starting to feel sorcery has some substantial drawbacks," Tasim replied.

"It's outright illogical for the effects of his spells to last forever," Clara snapped.

To be fair, sorcery more or less observed the law of conservation of energy. I couldn't say the same for magic...

"I guess you could say it's magic *because* it doesn't make logical sense." I recalled how, back in college, my game master would declare that in frustration whenever we got into heated arguments about the D&B magic system.

“For our last experiment, please cast *Dispel Magic* on these two materia,” Tasim requested.

“What are they?” I was feeling a touch weary as Tasim laid two items—both materia—before me. One was a battered greatsword, and the other was a new staff.

“This here is your typical sorcerer’s staff,” said Tasim. “A powerful curse is placed upon the other, making it a cursed sword. There actually is some logic for why I picked these two...but I’ll tell you after the experiment.”

Carved from special wood, the staves used by Sedian sorcerers were their most important tool. In general, sorcerers used the mana that flowed through their bodies, but it was possible to draw on supplementary mana that accumulated in their staves. *Yeah, this sort of thing is pretty common in tabletop RPG magic systems.*

I’ve never seen a cursed sword in this world before... Then again, this looks about the same as any other sword, so far as I can tell.

“Doesn’t *Dispel Magic* nullify magical power? I’d like to see what happens if you use it on these,” Tasim urged.

Seeing as this world’s materia functioned by eliciting the effects of mana, there were next to none with attributes that lasted indefinitely, much like how there weren’t any permanent spells in sorcery. Even cursed swords either required the wielder to channel their mana into the blade or possessed a limit on how many times they could be used.

“...As a consequence of this spell, all sources of magic within a three-meter radius will return to the void. *Dispel Magic.*”

Fortunately, none of my rolls for an activation check thus far had ended in a fumble. The dice tumbled favorably once more, releasing chaotic energy from the spellbook archive constructed deep within my consciousness. That energy engulfed the two materia.

“Wow!”

“My, my!”

I could see the chaotic energy—my magical power—but not the Sedian mana. As a result, I had no idea whether or not *Dispel Magic* actually worked on either of the materia.

“Just as I suspected,” Tasim exclaimed. “It had no effect on the staff, but eliminated the mana in the sword!”

“...You were expecting that to happen?” Clara asked dryly, giving a bored shrug in response to the excited young man.

Uh, what just happened?

“This sword wasn’t materia created by a sorcerer. Long ago, a warrior went berserk and slaughtered his lover and friends before chopping off his own head... It is said this is the cursed sword he used,” Tasim explained.

“I was testing with something that dangerous?!”

It was painfully clear that the sword and staff had been created under different circumstances, but what did that mean to me? Before I had a chance to ask, Tasim smugly proceeded to explain. “Although rare, there are instances of mana operating to create supernatural phenomena without the involvement of sorcery. The appearance of spirits, monstrosities, and even curses like the one that was on this sword are all good examples.”

“I personally believe it only *looks* like mana is operating, but the fundamental cause lies elsewhere,” Clara interjected.

“Agreed. And I bet that ‘fundamental cause’ is a form of power that your magical power is able to interact with. Who knows? Maybe it’s the same thing!”

“Hmmm...”

Something about the explanation didn’t feel quite right, but the takeaway for now was that my magic was effective against magic in this world—or at least, supernatural phenomena akin to magic. *Come to think of it, my Dispel Magic was able to free Reyha and the other dark elves from the daemonist’s brain-washing.*

“Honestly, I don’t think I’d ever get bored studying you!” Tasim leaned forward. “Lord Margilus, would you consider joining our guild?”

“...N-no, I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

Tasim showed me a wide variety of materia. Among those items, one in particular caught my eye: an iron doll that used mana to move. In other words...it was a golem.

“Hmmm, this reminds me of a marionette,” I observed.

Tasim agreed. “In reality, the only difference is that one uses strings and the other uses mana!”

Using the mana from Tasim’s staff as a power source, the man-sized iron doll rattled and clanked as it walked and ran. The sorcerers

in this world apparently did indeed refer to these mana-based remote-control dolls as “golems.” The golems and constructs of *D&B*—entities that could follow a given set of orders in perpetuity—were still a distant dream.

“It’d be hard to fight daemons with one of these,” I noted.

“But I’ve heard it is possible,” Tasim argued, “at least for sorcerers who are highly skilled golem masters...”

The two of us carried on discussing the vagaries of spellcraft until at last we received word of Heridol’s return. I was already beat, but the main reason I’d come was to speak with the branch president of the Relis Sorcerers’ Guild. I couldn’t turn tail and run now. Without so much as a word of complaint, I made my way toward the familiar hall on the top floor of the main building.

Heridol, the branch president, was there to greet us. “Welcome, Lord Margilus.”

“I-It is good to see you again,” stammered Yahman, the vice president.

“I am glad you were able to join us today,” finished Nasaria, the third seat.

The same officers as last time were waiting for me around the round table. Heridol, a handsome middle-aged man with golden locks, offered me his usual smile. It brimmed with confidence. *But if you ask me, that smile looks awfully forced.* Apparently, he was jealous of the way people treated me like a hero... *I swear, if he knew half the troubles I’ve had!*

Yahman’s smile was even more transparently false, but the smile that graced Nasaria’s lips hinted at more amiable feelings. Clara and Tasim took their seats next to the others, while I sat down across from Heridol to commence the meeting.

The agenda for the meeting was twofold. First, exchange information regarding wizardry and sorcery. Second, establish a cooperative relationship with the Relis Sorcerers’ Guild.

I insisted on skipping the exchange, given the wealth of information Tasim and I had exchanged prior to the meeting. This sent Yahman into a vicious tirade about how Tasim acted on his own without consulting the others first.

Ever since my first meeting with the guild, the prospect of

forming a cooperative relationship between us had been on hold. I'd served the ball when I made that proposal; now it was their turn to hit it back.

"First, allow me to present our collective decision: The Relis Branch of the Sorcerers' Guild has officially decided to cooperate with you in order to combat the daemons." Heridol spoke with crisp formality, but I sensed a certain reluctance somewhere in his words.

"...I am glad to hear it," I replied cordially. "I greatly appreciate your decision in this matter." I expressed my gratitude with a heartfelt nod.

I was filled with the desire to bow and say, "Thank you for your kind consideration!" to each of the officers. That's what we did in formal business meetings back in Japan, but I managed to resist the urge.

Clara spoke up then, eyes on Heridol. "By the way, what precisely does this 'cooperative relationship' entail?" As the fifth seat, she ranked as an officer, but apparently, she hadn't been informed about the guild's decision beforehand.

"About that. We would like to entrust one of our sorceresses to Lord Margilus," Heridol answered.

"Excuse me?"

"Feel free to have her deliver messages to us, and lend aid in your battles against daemons," Heridol continued.

I see what's really going on here. Whoever it is, I bet her duties will include keeping a close eye on me and gathering information. I suppose I don't see any harm coming from that, at least. It would be nice to have someone on hand who could tell me about sorcery.

"Furthermore, we would like to—and do forgive me if this comes across as insulting or presumptuous—test whether it is possible for us to learn your own magic." Heridol spoke without a hint of hesitation, the others bobbing their heads in agreement. Only Clara showed any uncertainty, her eyes flickering to either side. *I think it's safe to say they made this decision beforehand, and she was kept out of the loop.*

"That's the test you're after, is it...?" I peered back at Heridol. "Even if it would take a considerable length of time?"

Back when my gaming group and I were fleshing out our magic system, we went so far as to devise the training regimen magic users followed to reach Level 1. *Looking back, I think it's amazing we put so much thought and detail into the backstory.* If all those steps were

followed, there was a possibility that the people of this world could learn my style of magic. *On the other hand, I'd feel awful if we ultimately discovered Sedians can't learn it, and years were wasted on training.*

"We are fully aware of that possibility," Heridol answered. "Don't you intend to return to Castle Getaeus before long? You could impart your wealth of magical knowledge from the comfort of your own castle. Likewise, our appointed aide will be able to teach you about all manner of sorceries."

"You're assigning a member of the guild to live in my castle?" It came as a surprise to me. "Are you sure she doesn't mind?"

"Of course she doesn't mind. Isn't that right, Clara?"

"Gah!" When she heard Heridol call her name, Clara cried out like a spooked cat that had just been dunked in ice water.

She definitely didn't see that coming.

"Wait!" Clara protested. "No one ever mentioned this to me!"

"Th-then let me go instead," Tasim volunteered, raising his hand emphatically. "It sounds positively fascinating!"

"Stay out of this!" Clara snapped.

"Aww...!"

What the heck is this? A sketch comedy routine?

Heridol inclined his head. "Clara, would you not agree that you are on more intimate terms with Lord Margilus than anyone else in the Sorcerers' Guild? You are indeed the best candidate for the task at hand."

"*Intimate?! ...Well...I suppose you might possibly be able to say that...maybe...relatively speaking, anyway...*" Clara mumbled out her words, toying with her long blonde hair. It was an unusually cute gesture for the haughty noblewoman.

Objectively speaking, she didn't seem upset by the prospect of accompanying me to Castle Getaeus to study magic... In other words, she wasn't averse to the idea of living with me for the next several years. *Hmm, she might actually—no, of course she isn't interested in me like that.* But at the very least, she had told me once before that she had high expectations for me. Combined with her strong interest in magic, she truly was the perfect candidate.

"Lady Andell, your presence would be most appreciated. Furthermore, I have no qualms about teaching you magic."

"I-If that is how you feel," Clara conceded weakly.

If we proved that the art of magic could be acquired through

study, that alone would shake the Sorcerers' Guild to the core. Bearing that in mind, I felt far more comfortable teaching Clara than someone I hardly knew.

"Now that we have that out of the way," I said, "I would like to discuss the Relis City's—scratch that, the entire Ryuse Alliance's anti-daemon countermeasures."

"Oh, would you now?" For some odd reason, Heridol started beaming as I moved things along to the next topic on the agenda. (Meanwhile, I hadn't even gotten halfway through my words before Clara started glaring furiously and Nasaria began snickering.)

"Truth be told, our branch runs a sorcery school. It is currently implementing revolutionary teaching methods of my personal design," Heridol boasted.

So the Sorcerers' Guild has been embarking on new endeavors in its own right. I felt mildly impressed.

"We refer to those who come out of this program as 'Mage Knights.'"

I started to develop a basic understanding of the Mage Knights courtesy of the boastful explanation provided by one Heridol Sylem, president of the Relis Branch of the Sorcerers' Guild.

A sorcerer's training and development was usually split into four stages. First, they had to learn to sense and control their own mana. Second, they had to obtain the ability to perceive something known as a sorcery frame. Third, they had to comprehend the symbols on the sorcery frame known as sorcery code and manipulate them. Finally, they had to be able to organize the sorcery code and release mana according to the mental image derived from that combination.

Those in the first stage were apprentices, while those in the second stage were journeymen, and those in the third stage were adepts. Upon entering the fourth stage, they finally earned the title of true sorcerer.

It generally took anywhere from two to five years to progress from one step to the next, so it would take at least eight years of training to create a single sorcerer. As if that weren't bad enough, the weeding-out process was so ruthless that only one in several dozen made it all the way from apprentice to sorcerer. Although sorcerers were the most powerful figures on the battlefield in Sedia, their education required too much time and money.

“Realizing this, I decided to look at the education system from a completely different angle,” Heridol explained passionately. “I asked myself, ‘So long as we produce a viable force against the daemons, who is to say they must be full sorcerers?’ Wouldn’t it be possible to train students to use one or two simple spells without being able to recognize sorcery frames?”

“And it is indeed possible! They just have to be able to sense mana! Then we can forcibly implant data for the sorcery code, along with the image of the spell! The subjects are admittedly unable to independently organize or identify sorcery code, let alone learn new spells. However, their capabilities are more than sufficient for soldiers! Above all else, their brief training regimen means we can quickly increase their numbers. Mage Knights will be the ultimate means for exterminating the daemons!”

“.....”

The Mage Knights would be incredible if they truly were that strong and easy to train. Yet the looks of distaste worn by Clara and the sorceress who served as the third seat implied there were some unspoken flaws.

“In the War of Loss—the battle against the daemons ten years ago—Relis City suffered terrible losses. The Calbanera Knights proved to be of little value, making it clear to me that our fair city not only requires forces independent of that order, but also capable of smiting the daemons. Mage Knights can commence training as young as eight years of age. Transforming children normally incapable of combat into invaluable allies on the battlefield is one of the major merits of this program.” Vice president and second seat Yahman wore an ingratiating smile as he made this outrageous declaration.

Eight years old?! I get that humanity is at war with the daemons and all, but isn’t training little kids to be soldiers a bit much?! ...Wait, what if that’s normal here in Sedia...?

I needed more information. “So you start training children at an early age? How do you go about recruiting them?”

“Naturally, we recruit volunteers. Children from the nobility and high society, distraught over the state of our city. They volunteer to take up arms, so that they might become the shield of Relis.”

Clara stared daggers at the man. “I’ve noticed the recruitment pool has grown rather more diverse, of late.”

“Well, yes... This project is all about numbers, after all.” Yahman dabbed at the sweat that sprang up on his brow, practically wilting under Clara’s scrutiny. *Jeez, this is growing shadier by the*

second.

“Hmmm...” I grumbled to myself, arms crossed. I have absolutely no intention of taking part in a venture that promotes child abuse. In fact, I’ve half a mind to demand they shut the whole operation down right this instant. But it’s easy to say that when you’ve lived a peaceful, modern-day life. Would my sentiments change if I wasn’t so coddled?

What if they truly need this?

Chapter 4

I PAID A VISIT to the Sorcerers' Guild the following day to observe the Mage Knights' training. The school and adjoining training center were built on a small island on Lake Ryuse. I had to take a gondola to get there.

Gliding across the surface of the lake was truly refreshing. *I'd enjoy this a lot more if I didn't have to sit next to a man even older than me...*

Yahman was in high spirits, but his incessant jabbering the whole boat ride drove me batty. It didn't help that he mostly bragged about his personal exploits. If this had been modern Japan, he would definitely have been *that* guy—the one at the bar who talks the bartender's ear off. All I could do was grin and bear it. Yahman's (boastful) stories persisted until we reached our destination.

The sorcery school itself was an impressive structure that resembled a chateau, but the Mage Knights were trained in completely different facilities. Instead of making our way to the center of the island where the school was located, we steered toward the outskirts of the island once we disembarked.

We were met at the Mage Knights training center by the superintendent, a sorcerer by the name of Gilead. "I take it you're that self-proclaimed wizard?" He didn't even try to hide his condescension.

Yahman stepped forward. "W-watch yourself! Didn't the branch president himself send a message directing you to treat Lord Margilus with respect?!"

"I am treating him with respect...after my own fashion," Gilead replied. He struck me as the kind of headstrong man who only believed in what he could see with his own eyes. *I don't have time to win over every skeptic under the sun*, I thought to myself, and decided against rising to his challenge.

"I appreciate that you're taking time out of your busy schedule to give me this tour," I said. "Now, would it be possible to observe the Mage Knights' training?"

"But of course! Gilead, are you ready for us?"

"...Yes, right this way. I doubt you'll find it terribly amusing to

watch, though.”

As we made our way to the sorcery training field, Gilead explained how they conditioned the Mage Knights. Sorcery generally took a decade or more of study, but they condensed their curriculum into only three years. On top of that, students went through a kind of boot camp to hone their skills as soldiers. The basic concept had been proposed by Branch President Heridol, while the details—from experimenting with different training methods to overseeing their implementation—was left to Gilead.

I’d had some high hopes for this program when I arrived, but as it turned out, the school was a complete and utter disgrace. The first class eight years ago had been composed of nearly fifty children from nobility and the upper class, all of whom had volunteered. Of those fifty, only two had managed to complete their entire curriculum and meet the minimum requirements of a Mage Knight. The others were unable to withstand the program and dropped out, were forced to quit due to injury, or died. As a result, there were fewer than twenty volunteers for the second class. This time, only a single student had been able to withstand the training.

“This is even worse than I imagined,” I whispered.

“Come again?”

“Nothing, nothing... Tell me, how does the current class fare?”

“We are currently in the midst of training up our third cohort. We primarily sought volunteers among the common citizenry and farmers outside the city, but their initial lack of interest sadly drove us to begin offering enlistment bonuses, which brought in eighty volunteers. Not only is this our largest class to date, but we have also made substantial improvements to the training regimen after thoroughly reviewing the curriculum used with the first and second classes.”

In other words, no one financially sound was willing to sacrifice their children to your insane program, so you turned to the poor? I certainly hope you haven’t stooped to human trafficking... I felt gloom wash over me as we reached the sorcery training grounds. It’s just a big, empty field.

“These are our meditation cells.”

“What the heck?” I blurted out.

Gilead was gesturing toward rows of pits about two meters deep that dotted the grounds. Each was supplied with its own ladder for climbing in and out...and a lid. Roughly ten of the pits were covered. *I guess that means they’re “in use,” so to speak.*

A sorcerer acting in the capacity of something akin to a coach stood there, mindlessly “watching” over them.

“It’s vital for the caster to be able to thoroughly visualize their spells in order to use them without the aid of a sorcery frame. We’ve found that the training is most effective if conducted in a space that cuts off the five senses,” Gilead explained.

The cadets were given special herbs to relax their minds before burrowing into these pits to devote all of their attention to memorizing the image of a spell. *Whoa, back up! The instructors here are giving kids drugs to relax?!*

“We have found they form stronger mental images of the spells with the implementation of supplementary aids such as these, rather than simply meditating in the darkness,” Gilead went on proudly. He showed me a copper plate with an engraving that depicted the moment *Falga Lans* sprang from a sorcerer’s staff. By imagining the spell as they ran their fingers over the plate, the cadets’ mental image of *Falga Lans* supposedly grew increasingly distinct.

“Is that so...? Well...I suppose I’m not well-informed enough to have a strong opinion about the technique...”

When you get down to it, the theory behind my magic is nothing more than some backstory I concocted as a bored college kid to feed my tabletop RPG obsession. So even if I have a problem with the method just explained to me, it really isn’t my place to shoot it down, and yet...

“Sorry,” I said, “But would you mind if I asked something?”

“What is it?”

“In the practice of sorcery, you’ve explained that it’s vital to have vivid mental images of the spell, yes? In which case, wouldn’t actual demonstrations be more effective?”

“...Huh?”

Yeah, this is the part that makes absolutely no sense to me. Seeing as they actually have sorcerers on the premises, why don’t they show the kids some spells?! But my question earned looks from Yahman and Gilead that seemed to shout, “Is this fellow completely mad?”

“...Uh...well, if we used that method, it would require showing the cadet sorcery on a daily basis from the very beginning,” Yahman objected.

“Furthermore, we must ensure that the students are of suitable moral fiber before they begin to acquire skills in earnest. Sorcery, after all, is a dangerous weapon,” Gilead insisted heatedly. “All in all, it should be evident that our school’s basic principles prevent adopting

such a method as you suggest.”

“Really...?”

I was less than impressed with the excuses they threw out, but the next words Yahman whispered under his breath were on a level far beyond anything I could have imagined. “Besides, how would we maintain our status if people could learn sorcery that easily...?”

Clang! Clang! While I stood staring at the sorcerer in shock, a piercing bell resounded in my ears. It must have been some kind of alarm. The lids that sealed the pits slid off from the inside. Exhaustion was plainly written on the faces of the young boys and girls as they climbed out of their cells.

“Excellent work. Take a three-hour break,” the instructor arrogantly ordered his students. The wilted cadets collapsed on the ground.

“Urgh...”

“.....”

With unfocused eyes and pallid faces, the cadets fell in line and began to march in unison. It was almost mechanical—like a bunch of sleepwalkers. *This isn't training, it's abuse...*

Next, I was led to the outer periphery of the island. The beautiful sandy beach on the lake rivaled the classiest of resorts, but...

“I don't see your feet moving! Hup, hup! The moment a soldier can't walk, he's DEAD!”

I was shown a group of about ten boys and girls carrying wood and rucksacks as a burly soldier drove them to march fervently along the beach.

“And here,” explained Gilead, “you see our ruck march training. Cadets currently undergoing instruction in the third class will be assigned to the Sorcerers' Guild as Mage Knights after they receive one year of military training.”

“...As I recall, you said eighty children were recruited for the third class. How many are still left?” I asked.

“Eighteen have withstood the curriculum and progressed accordingly. It's a testament to our improved training curriculum,” Gilead boasted. I didn't even want to know what happened to the sixty-two children who couldn't withstand the program.

“According to the plans I’ve devised with the branch president, we should be able to consistently produce Mage Knights capable of single-handedly defeating a fiend by the fifth class.”

“Quite the plan,” I said vaguely, nodding in response to Gilead’s ambitious claim. Inside me, strong emotions simmered.

“Tel! Not you *again*! On your feet!”

As I watched the children “train” with arms crossed over my chest, I noticed the smallest boy lagging at the end of the file collapse to the ground. Despite the soldier screaming in his ear, the lad showed no sign of budging. Fortunately, the large boy at the front of the line noticed and came running to the rescue.

“Tel, we’re almost done. You can do it! Everyone, give it all you’ve got!” The large boy shouted encouragingly before hoisting the scrawny lad across his shoulder to drag him the rest of the way. For the soldier to let it slide, this probably happened often. Seeing as the other cadets cheered in response to the large boy’s pep talk, it was probably safe to assume he was their leader.

“That one is Log, the most promising of our third class. I expect he will prove more beneficial on the front than anyone from the first or second cohort.”

I studied the boy’s—Log’s—face as I listened to Gilead’s explanation. He was enduring the brutal ruck march training...but there was more to it than just that. I could sense a strong will behind those eyes glaring straight ahead that would put most adults to shame.

“After this is combat training.”

“I’d like to ask another question... You’ve mentioned the program has improved since the first two classes, but what exactly have you changed?”

“Due to the majority of our cadets coming from noble families or the upper class, we were unable to implement any high-risk, high-yield methods. Naturally, we’ve applied a wide range of modifications since then, such as the copper plates you saw earlier.”

I don’t foresee this place “improving” any time in the future... No offence to the sorcerers, but I can’t envision anything decent coming out of this Mage Knight training center at all. But the cultivation of Mage Knights could be considered a communal undertaking by Relis as a whole, not just Heridol’s personal endeavor. Indeed, it might be

widely supported within Relis City. After all, it was the result of desperate brainstorming over ways to contend with the daemon threat. As an outsider, was it really my place to bark protests?

...*That's right. I'm an outsider.* I could tell they'd fought and struggled to develop an anti-daemon force. Their plan was perfectly reasonable, right?

No, it's not. The thought struck me like a bolt of lightning. *It's reasonable to make children soldiers fight daemons? There is no way in the world that's reasonable.* I was merely tricking myself into going along with it. If adults called this “reasonable,” they only did it to protect their own interests. Situations like this were the very definition of injustice.

“What’s your next move?” The masculine voice of my old friend and trusted game master drifted across my mind for the first time in a while. Come to think of it, I’d been forced to make important decisions (in gaming sessions) on numerous occasions when he posed that very question. Those experiences with him came in handy now. Thanks to the memory of his haughty grin, I was able to calmly decide my “next move.”

“I have an idea. If combat training is next, perhaps I could offer some assistance of my own?” I waited for Gilead to respond, gathering my thoughts in the corner of my mind. It was mildly surprising how effortlessly I could multitask. I probably owed such impressive mental capacity to Geo’s 18 INT.

“Pardon?”

“I am able to conjure servants with attributes on par with fiends and imps. I would be willing to make some for the cadets to spar against,” I offered.

The hard truth was that in any world, there existed otherwise sensible adults who believed they had no choice but to reconcile the existence of injustices by calling them “reasonable” or “necessary.” *In which case, the great magic user Geo Margilus will blow all those injustices away!*

The cadets were allowed ample time to rest before we began. Yahman, Gilead, the eighteen children, and I all gathered for a mock battle at a field of packed dirt, generously referred to as the “military training field.”

The cadets were equipped with spears and plain armor.

Uncertainty and fear filled the majority of their faces. Wait... The black-haired boy at the front of the column—Log—was the only one glaring at me challengingly. As I recalled, he was considered the top of his class.

“I bet he can’t really create daemons,” Gilead scoffed.

“Shh! What if he hears you?! Keep quiet and watch,” Yahman snapped, whispering.

Ignoring the two middle-aged sorcerers whispering literally right behind my back, I strode before the file of cadets.

“.....!” Their nerves visibly grew taut. *What in the world did they hear about me?*

This takes me back to my old life in Japan... It’s like the times I spoke behind a podium during the training seminars for new employees. I wish they’d paid as much attention as these children are...

“Ahem...! I am the wizard Geo Margilus. I consider myself your ally; I harbor the same desire as all of you to protect the masses from the daemons.” Their eyes widened in surprise at my words. I raised my staff slightly to hush the whispers rippling between them. A testament to their military training: The buzz of commotion came to an instant stop.

“I genuinely appreciate the profound devotion you’ve displayed toward your training. As such, I would like to take the liberty to give you the opportunity to practice fighting creatures on the same level as daemons,” I continued.

“.....?”

Not only Log, but several of the children narrowed their eyes suspiciously. The other cadets began to fidget nervously. *They think I’m making fun of them.* I could even feel Gilead’s icy glare against my back.

“As a consequence of this spell, I will create eighteen Level 1 goblins and one Level 6 ogre in this space under my command for a duration of one hour. *Create Monster.*”

At the very instant I completed the spell, a horde of small-horned, big-eared goblins appeared, along with an ogre with reddish-brown skin. The moment the children and sorcerers realized what was standing before them, the awkward silence was broken.

“...That’s enough,” I called out.

Combat training was over in the blink of an eye. Before it began, there was a little fiasco. Most of the cadets flew into a panic at the sight of the goblins and ogre. Gilead outright fainted from fear!

Needless to say, the kids weren't able to put up much of a fight in the end. Unlike *Create Ogre Platoon*, *Create Monster* was capable of creating most basic monsters without any special attributes. In exchange for its versatility, the effect of the spell only lasted for an hour. But the goblins and ogre didn't even need five minutes to pin down the entire third class.

The goblins and ogre fought barehanded (with orders to hold back substantially, of course), but most students were taken down before anything resembling a "fight" took place. The only exceptions were Log and a blonde girl, both of whom used their magic to defeat one goblin each.

I ordered my obedient monsters to fall back and approached the cadets before asking, "Did anyone get hurt? Feel free to let me know."

"...Excuse me, but I think he hit his head," Log said, carrying over a moaning boy with his head in his hands.

"I see. Sorry about that," I apologized. As I helped the boy drink a potion, the blonde girl (called Daya, I later learned) glared silently at me.

"...Th-they are still in the middle of their training! They couldn't hope to fight against actual daemons like these! Besides—" Gilead began to plead his case, his face ghastly pale.

With a shake of my head, I cut the sorcerer's tirade short. "At any rate, I have seen the best Mage Knight cadets the Sorcerers' Guild has to offer. I shall inform Lord Heridol of my opinion at a later time. If possible, could you go on ahead? I would like to have a brief word with the cadets in private."

I plunked down before the cadets, still sprawled out in exhausted heaps across the ground. "I swear not to repeat any of what we are about to discuss to the Sorcerers' Guild without your permission. I want to make myself very clear on that before we proceed." I spoke quietly. As I continued, the children began pushing themselves up into whatever sitting position struck their fancy. Although hardly surprising, nothing but uncertainty showed on the expressions they directed toward me.

"All I ask is that you answer my questions truthfully. To begin

with, do you honestly want to fight daemons? For the record, real daemons are several hundred times more terrifying than the monsters you just fought.”

My question made the majority of cadets drop their heads to look away from me. Only two in the entire class raised their heads boldly.

“I’m gonna avenge my Pa!”

“Me, too.”

Daya and Log were the only ones to look me straight in the eye and proclaim their desire to fight. There were a few others who nodded in assent.

“Now, let me ask those of you who want to fight daemons: Do any of you have your heart set on becoming Mage Knights?” I asked. All of them seemed conflicted over this one.

“I-It’s not like I have my heart set on it... But this is the only place that will train kids like us how to fight...”

“And if you manage to survive, at least they give you food and a bed here...”

These were the timid answers of Log and another boy. As I suspected, they were orphans.

“Do any of you wish to go back home to your parents?” I asked.

Nearly half of the kids raised their hands. But based on their expressions, they knew that no one would welcome them back with open arms if they did return.

“From the explanations I’ve heard and the observations I’ve made, I’ve determined it would be extremely difficult—no, impossible—for you to put up a decent fight against real daemons as Mage Knights.”

Nevertheless, they doggedly endured that nightmarish curriculum. Log and Daya bit their lips as they glared balefully at me. My heart went out to them, but I wasn’t about to mince words.

“I intend to negotiate the temporary closure of the Mage Knight training center with the Sorcerers’ Guild. I will personally give anyone who wants to go home a one-time payment to ease the financial burden. If you have nowhere to go, I will set you up with jobs or a spot at an orphanage or...well, *somewhere* for you to go! And if you truly wish to fight daemons, I will make arrangements for you to enter the Order of the Calbanera Knights. Of course, you will have to work your way from the bottom up.”

I'll have to rely on Ild or Chairman Brauze yet again to find the children jobs. Even though I haven't cleared this with the Calbanera Knights, they owe me a favor or two. I honestly doubt they could turn my request down, especially not if I offer to cover the cost of training the children for a while. As I was working out the plans in my head, Log slapped his hands on the ground.

"H-hey, Mister! Er, I mean, Lord Wizard! I-I'm begging you! Teach me magic...please!" The lad lowered his bushy black hair to the ground as he kowtowed.

I was afraid of this... The kid wasn't lying when he said he wanted to fight daemons.

"...Even if I imparted my knowledge, it's highly unlikely you'd be able to use magic. We wouldn't even know one way or the other until you'd invested years into training," I answered truthfully. *Besides, I can't pit a child against daemons. Taking him on is a completely different story from teaching Clara. Even if I swap out sorcery for magic, it doesn't somehow make it all okay.*

"I don't care how many years it takes! I'll do anything, even menial labor! It's not like I have parents to go back to. Besides..."

"....."

Not only strong hatred for daemons, but something else glimmered in Log's eyes as he stared into mine. Inwardly, I felt overpowered by the pure strength of his will. If I'd had to face him when I was in Japan, I probably would have wanted to turn tail and run. Perhaps the only reason I could stand my ground now was because I was forming a strong will of my own, a resolve that I'd never possessed before.

"Besides, aren't you also trying to exterminate the daemons, Lord Wizard? I want to help you! I have a feeling I'll get to fight a whole lot more daemons with you than I would as a Mage Knight or a knight!"

"I want to become a knight...but wizards seem far more powerful..."

"I want to stay with Log..."

"I was originally left to die in a ditch, anyway..."

As if Log's passion was contagious, Daya and several other cadets began begging me to take them under my wing as apprentices.

"Ugh..."

Evidently, I'd taken their resolve too lightly. No matter what, I absolutely refused to even consider it an option to place them under

my care only to repeat the Sorcerers' Guild's atrocities. But at the same time...

"...Then just don't repeat their mistakes," I mumbled to myself as I rose to my feet and brushed the sand off my legs.

"Hm?"

The kernel of an idea was beginning to take form in my mind. There were more ways to fight daemons than launching direct attacks like cleaving or incinerating them.

I'll let them join my retinue. They might be young, but they still have the right to choose their own path in life. Now I just have to convince the Sorcerers' Guild...namely Heridol. I doubt he'll willingly give up his boot camp, even if I point out how flawed the Mage Knights are as anti-daemon forces. My nascent plan might be just what I needed to persuade him. I decided to use the gondola ride back to the Sorcerers' Guild to organize my thoughts.

"...Given their current condition, it is highly unlikely they would survive actual combat. I believe cultivating Mage Knights should be suspended," I declared to the officers gathered in the great hall of the Sorcerers' Guild.

Hearing my brazenly harsh critique of a project that spanned a decade put sour expressions on all—or, well, almost all—present. Heridol and Yahman were definitely as sour as vinegar. Especially Heridol. He was trying his hardest to maintain the semblance of a smile, but it was painfully obvious he was grinding his teeth.

On the other hand, Nasaria and Clara were nodding with furrowed brows. Tasim was champing at the bit, eager to hear what I would pop out with next.

"I'll admit the current Mage Knights might not be what you'd call a valuable asset on the battlefield. However, their strength can be improved upon through further research," Yahman said, trying to play the mediator between Heridol and me, his head swiveling back and forth between the two of us. Apparently, the children who'd been killed or maimed during the course of such research were irrelevant to these men.

"Wouldn't boosting their strength prove difficult? I mean, the whole point of this plan was to mass-produce soldiers capable of using weak spells, wasn't it? If you start mass-producing soldiers who use strong spells, wouldn't it undermine the very premise of the project?"

Tasim argued in a somewhat squeaky voice as he pushed up his glasses. I knew he was the absent-minded professor type...and he spoke right on cue!

“But...”

“I realize how cruel this must sound after all of the hard work you have invested in the program, but I want you to face reality,” I said sternly.

Everyone present knew how the “mock battle” with the monsters I’d created had ended. No one could argue with me on this.

“.....”

“We can’t shut down the Mage Knight training program after all these years!” Yahman barked out a protest that was truly in character for the vice president. “All of the money that has gone into it would be for nothing.”

Heridol continued to glare at me with his lips firmly pressed together. *They’re worried about profit, huh? Well, if I think of the Sorcerers’ Guild as a commercial organization, their concerns aren’t entirely misplaced.*

Clara jumped into the conversation right after Yahman. “It’s easy to tell us to shut the program down, but do you have any better ideas? Can you prepare forces at a lower cost that are stronger than the Mage Knights?”

“Well said! I’d love to hear your proposition, if you have one.”

Going by the look on her face, Clara clearly didn’t think favorably of the Mage Knights, either. What was being done to those children went against all her beliefs. Nevertheless, she forced herself to believe it was necessary, since it was one of the few options that addressed the issue on how to combat daemons. Her stance was appropriate for an officer of the guild.

“...Certainly.” I pulled several objects from my Infinity Bag and tossed them to the floor in the center of the hall. With a dull clang, six metal nuggets almost the size of my fingertips rolled across the ground.

“What are those...?”

“Loyal soldiers, rise!” I commanded. The six metal nuggets began to pulsate and expand.

“Whoa!”

“My word...!”

Once the nuggets grew to the size of adult humans, they began

to alter their form more drastically. Heads sprouted, and they grew arms and legs. The metal shifted to make swords, shields, and armor. Within a matter of seconds, the six nuggets turned into six life-size statues of soldiers. They were Soldiers of Bronze, the golems I'd had Geo Margilus create (in a game session) with his *Construct Monsters* ability. As the name implied, their bronze bodies were equipped with swords, shields, and helmets in a design reminiscent of Roman legionaries. In accordance with the *D&B* rulebook, they were all Level 8. Despite the physical appearance of robust men, they were considerably stronger than my Level 8 ogres.

"Incredible..."

"Amazing...! Lord Margilus, aren't those golems?!" Tasim could hardly contain himself.

"Indeed, they are. I would like to offer the ability to create these golems to the Sorcerers' Guild. The process of creating golems, which I will save for another time, is pure craftsmanship. Anyone with the time and interest is fully capable of learning how," I explained.

My plan was clear. The time and manpower spent on training Mage Knights could be used for golem production instead. This was the idea I'd devised to help the Sorcerers' Guild strengthen their anti-daemon forces. It had been sitting in the back of my mind as a vague idea ever since Tasim had told me about this world's golems the other day, but the blazing passion of Log and the other children had forged it into something concrete.

Crafting golems was a master-level *Construct Monster* ability in *D&B*. According to the rules, a specific amount of experience and money was required to obtain the ability, but it wasn't limited to any specific classes. Furthermore, there were non-player characters who were master golem artificers even though they weren't magic users. If the Watcher stayed true to that detail as well, Sedians should be able to learn how to craft golems.

"Soldiers, enter a defensive formation around me," I ordered, spurring the soldiers into action. They moved with unbelievable fluidity for their metal frames. They slid into defensive positions behind me and to either side before raising their spears and shields.

"Wow! They follow verbal commands?" Tasim was even *more* excited now.

"That is correct," I answered. "Although limited, they have the capacity to determine how best to carry out their orders."

Assuming they had the time, materials, and know-how, the guild could produce as many golems as they wanted. If they broke, they

could always be repaired. Plus, they wouldn't incur any labor fees. While they couldn't be expected to operate with the flexibility of people, their fighting capacity on the battlefield clearly outstripped the Mage Knights.

"Precisely how well do these golems compare to the Mage Knights?" Clara asked.

"Knowing both, I can say for certain a single golem could take on ten fully trained Mage Knights. In terms of daemons, it could handle thirty imps or take out an ogre or two," I answered.

"I don't believe we...actually need to test them, do we? But I will admit, it would be fascinating to watch," said Clara.

While Clara calmly asked her practical questions, Tasim ogled over the constructs. Meanwhile, Heridol and Yahman simply looked ill.

"Is there any chance we could learn the skills needed to construct golems?" she asked.

"There is. A good chance, at that. I would like to recruit volunteers from the Mage Knight cadets."

"What? Those cadets? But I want you to teach *me*!" Tasim balked.

"...Their limited knowledge of sorcery and pliable young minds make them ideal," I explained. While it was true I wanted to assist Relis and the Sorcerers' Guild with their anti-daemon countermeasures, I was going to use this as my excuse to take Log and the other children under my wing.

"How much does it cost to make one?" Clara asked.

"If you went with the cheapest, I believe the wood golem would cost around one thousand gold coins. They require some special materials, which are hard to come by. But I think it's a bargain when you consider the fact that they are tireless soldiers that don't require pay and can take a beating before they need repairs."

The Soldiers of Bronze were special golems that could shrink to the size of chess pieces for easy transportation. Due to that unique feature, they had lower strength than other golems with similar construction costs. But that also meant simpler golems of comparable ability were both quicker and cheaper to make.

"...I see. That makes sense," Clara said with a nod, seemingly satisfied with my presentation.

Yahman, however, flew into a panicked frenzy. He burst out with, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! Not so fast! What would we tell all of the

nobles and citizens who have supported our efforts fostering Mage Knights throughout the years if we abandon the project now? Don't you see how the guild would lose face?!"

"Lose face," huh? Well, I was a businessman once. I can understand how important reputation is for an organization. Bearing that in mind, I gave the officers one last push.

"Even if the technology originated from me, won't the guild retain its authority if you're the only ones constructing the golems?"

".....?" Throughout this whole exchange, Heridol hadn't once spoken a word. His eyes no longer burned solely with anger as confusion flickered across them. "Aren't you going to create golems? You could make your own golem army if you so desired," he said, perplexed.

"Well, I might make a few for personal defense, but I don't have the time to mass-produce enough to distribute to all of the cities. I would rather leave that in the capable hands of the Sorcerers' Guild. Don't you think golems could prove overall highly dependable forces if the entire guild—not just this branch—participated in constructing them?"

"...The guild would be the heart of the operation, huh?" Heridol mused, chewing over the concept.

"All I want is to exterminate the daemons...and only because I wish to protect humanity. Honestly, I'd prefer if the guild took the credit for the golems."

At the sound of this, Heridol's expression softened a little. At least when it came to fighting daemons, we were probably of like mind.

"W-wait, Branch President Heridol! How could we garner any authority when parading borrowed technology...? And lest you forget, the city council has also donated a sizable amount to this project," Yahman protested.

The vice president generally poses as Heridol's lackey, so what's the deal here? What's driving him to break character and protest so vehemently against my proposition?

"Vice President?" Clara called in a troubled voice. Both her voice and expression were soft, but I could see intense anger burning in the depths of her eyes.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Does the fact that we received funding from the city council trouble you? ...If it does, I am willing to personally ensure the city

council knows exactly how their donations were spent, citing precise figures in my explanation,” Clara offered.

This was all it took for the reality of the situation to click. *That dirty rat!* raced across my mind.

“I-I don’t need your help! I’m in charge of overseeing the budget!” Yahman snapped.

“True, but I happen to have some connections with the city council of my own,” Clara whispered, (clearly fake) concern etched across her visage.

“What?!” Yahman cried, the muscles in his face twitching.

From the looks of it, Yahman had either embezzled or otherwise misused the funds for training Mage Knights provided by the city council. *No wonder he doesn’t want it to get shut down!*

“What are you going on about? That isn’t important right now,” Heridol said. Evidently, the exchange between Clara and Yahman had gone right over his head.

“It’s nothing. I simply spoke out of line. It truly would be best for the vice president to explain everything to the city council,” Clara replied sweetly, even as she glared daggers at Yahman.

“I-Indeed... I-If we shut down the program, I will take it upon myself to explain it to them,” Yahman consented with a nod, beads of cold sweat running down his face.

It was clear some sort of deal had been made between the two just now. Going by the sick look on Yahman’s face, it greatly favored Clara.

Come to think of it, Clara hailed from one of the noble families in this city, sharing the same family tree as Duke Andell. As a commoner not only in my previous life, but going way back up my family tree, I couldn’t even begin to imagine all the trials she’d faced.

“Hrmm.....” Heridol fell into silent contemplation, bowing his head with eyes closed.

“Excuse me,” said Nasaria, the third seat, as she hesitantly raised her hand. “I think your proposition is truly wonderful, Lord Margilus. However, there is one aspect that concerns me. I am afraid an army of golems could prove *too powerful*. Won’t it make the world view the Sorcerers’ Guild as a threat?”

“Ugh, I don’t think you need to worry too much about it,” Tasim groaned.

“N-no, she’s right. That is a legitimate concern,” Yahman agreed.

None of the sorcerers seemed to comprehend the gravity of Nasaria's question, but I was impressed by it. This was a clever woman, able to cut straight to the heart of things.

"Special command words are programmed into golems to make them operable," I explained, "So you could divide the commands and share half of them with Relis. I doubt you would be seen as a threat if your branches in the other cities did that as well."

"I see... That is a good suggestion, given the premise that we're only using these as weapons to fight against daemons," Nasaria acknowledged.

This was along the lines of letting everyone have a copy of the remote-control gun for Gigantor. By distributing the command words, the golems couldn't be weaponized against humans in war. This was yet another one of their perks.

"If you're concerned, you could also have the city run periodic checks," I suggested.

"I see. Thank you for addressing my concerns," Nasaria replied with a smile. She bobbed her head graciously before turning to Heridol. "Branch President Heridol, I think we should accept Lord Margilus's proposal."

"...As do I," Clara chimed in.

"You know I do!" Tasim exclaimed.

"I-I...ugh, I will abide by your decision," Yahman forced out.

Heridol slowly rose from his seat.

"Lord Margilus," he began. It looked like the handsome sorcerer was clenching his teeth. Until I'd come along, he was the most dependable person in the entire city. The strongest man in all of Relis. Having to hear me criticize his beloved project and offer to replace it with my technology... It must have been a blow to his pride. But even so, he gave the nod of approval.

"We shall humbly accept your proposal. The Relis Branch of the Sorcerers' Guild is grateful for your friendship, Lord Geo Margilus."

Discussions with the Sorcerers' Guild ultimately concluded as follows:

Effective immediately, the Mage Knight training center will temporarily shut down.

Fully trained Mage Knights shall take posts as guards, or other positions deemed necessary, at the Sorcerers' Guild.

Cadets in the third class who wish to return to their parents or become independent shall be discharged and offered severance pay.

Positions with the Calbanera Knights, local merchants, or other tradesmen will be secured for any third-class cadets who express interest.

Geo Margilus will instruct any interested applicants from the third class in the craft of golem construction.

Once said applicants have mastered the skill of golem construction, they will return to the guild to share the skill and commence manufacturing golems.

In the event the Sorcerers' Guild begins golem production, the guild will share the command words with the city.

Henceforth, Geo Margilus and the Relis Branch of the Sorcerers' Guild will maintain a collaborative relationship with regard to anti-daemon countermeasures.

The Sorcerers' Guild is loaning Clara Andell, Fifth Seat, to Geo Margilus in order to exchange information and conduct research pertaining to magic and sorcery.

"What a relief we squared that all away. Thank you for the help," I said.

"...I merely said what I thought was appropriate as an officer in the guild," Clara replied, walking me to the guild's main gate. The sun was already setting by the time the discussions finally drew to a close. Even though she'd curbed the vice president's protests by threatening to bring his corruption to light, Clara was acting the same as always.

"You..."

"Yes?"

"You said that you're fighting to protect humanity from the daemons. This was part of your battle against them, wasn't it?"

"Well, I suppose you could say that..."

I'd already informed Clara and Sedam about the promise that I'd made to myself. I was fully aware of how horribly out of touch with reality I sounded. A middle-aged man shouldn't talk about protecting all humanity! Hearing Clara confirm my intent with a straight face

was honestly embarrassing.

“You’re willing to fight for this world alongside people who hate you? What happened to wanting to retire in peace?”

“It’s not like they hate me enough to start throwing stones at me. And, uh, I’d appreciate it if you could forget about that whole retirement thing.”

If only it were so simple. I would have loved nothing more than a peaceful retirement. But if I took a minute to paint a picture of the future in my mind, I didn’t see any place for it.

“Let’s say I was only concerned about my own well-being and became a hermit somewhere in the countryside. One day, a little bird might tell me that Relis was destroyed by daemons. Even if it was some city or village I had never heard of, I’m sure I would think, ‘I could have saved everyone if I was there.’ I don’t think I could live with myself knowing that,” I explained.

If only I didn’t have the power of a mighty wizard. Then I could have carried out life the way I had in Japan, cutting my coat according to my cloth. But there was no point dwelling on what could have been.

But dang! I probably sound like a pretentious jerk. I averted my gaze in embarrassment. Looking away, I was unable to catch Clara’s reaction.

“I...” Clara trailed off. Then, suddenly, she knelt on one knee before me and dropped her head low. Her hands were laid across each other over her chest. It almost looked as if she were kneeling in prayer.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I, Clara Andell, offer my greatest respect to the tremendous magical power and equally noble soul of the magic user, Lord Geo Margilus.”

“Uhhh...”

From her elegant posture to the clarity of her declaration, Clara’s perfect display of fealty left no room for fault. And then there was me. As nothing more than a middle-aged businessman on the inside, it took every ounce of willpower I had to keep from dropping to the ground and prostrating myself before her.

But seriously, how am I supposed to respond to this? In all my twenty-plus years in the office, I’d never once had a woman kneel down to express her great respect for me. It’s pretty safe to say it hadn’t been covered in the company etiquette handbook, either.

“.....”

Fortunately, Clara smoothly stood back up, completely ignoring how my lips flapped wordlessly as I tried and failed to find the right words to say.

“Wh-what brought that on? I nearly had a heart attack.”

“Nothing in particular. I merely stated my personal feelings, heedless of my position as a noblewoman or as an official in the Sorcerers’ Guild.”

“R-really...? Uh...thank you?”

“You have earned the respect of Clara Andell, noblewoman and sorceress. You should be most grateful,” Clara insisted, thrusting out her ample chest with pride.

It didn’t matter if strangers feared or hated me as long as I had friends like her. *I may not be good at saying it, but I truly am grateful.*

“Tell me. What do you intend to do now?” she asked.

“It will probably take some time, but I’d like to form an alliance dedicated to fighting daemons. In order to do that, I’ll have to secure my own position first.”

My decision was based on the advice I’d received from Brauze. After the agreement I’d just established with the Sorcerers’ Guild, I needed to expedite preparations to make Castle Getaeus into a proper stronghold.

A stronghold, huh? The castle was in greater need of staff than it was equipment or supplies.

I peered into Clara’s blue eyes before dropping my head into a low bow. “I am glad you will be joining me at Castle Getaeus. Your presence will be greatly appreciated. I’m looking forward to working alongside you henceforth.”

“.....”

I strived to come across pretty formal and sincere, but Clara didn’t make so much as a peep.

“...Huh?”

Raising my head in surprise, I found her looking away with cheeks burning red. She was twirling a strand of blonde hair between her fingers.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I upset you...?”

Clara narrowed her eyes as if she wanted to say something, but silently thrust her hand out toward me instead. We exchanged a firm

handshake before parting ways.

Chapter 5

“**I**LD, I DON’T KNOW what I’d do without you.”

“You don’t mean that!”

“No, I do! I’d be lost if it weren’t for the two of you,” I insisted.

Now that Ild was back from Soler, I was of a mind to ask for his advice on how to proceed. As it was, I already kept the merchant busy trying to find staff to work at Castle Getaeus. Now I needed to inform him the castle would be more than just my abode.

“Listen, Ild.”

“Yes?”

“You’re one of the first to know, but I plan on gathering like-minded companions at Castle Getaeus to make strides toward protecting the world from daemons.”

“...I see,” Ild said, nodding. Trying to imagine what I should do next, he most likely came to the same conclusion as Brauze. Upon reaching that conclusion, he began to give off a completely different air. His smile was still as warm as ever, but he was brimming with the determination of a skilled merchant. “That is truly

a grand undertaking, one that none but you could hope to accomplish, Lord Margilus.”

“That’s just it. I need you to find castle staff who will support my goal. If you know of anyone who might be willing to join my cause, I’d appreciate if you let me know.”

“...It won’t be easy, but I will find the people you need.”

That was the extent of our discussion at the time. But a few days later, Ild and Mora stood on ceremony as they brought it back up.

“First, I would like you to hire me as your steward for Castle Getaeus. Then Mora can tend to you at your side. Finally, three members of my staff can come along as your valets.”

“What...?”

“Please! Mister Geo, please take us with you!” Mora begged.

A steward’s job was to oversee the practical matters concerning the estate along with all of the financial affairs on behalf of his lord. In a way, the steward was the brains of a castle, issuing orders to grunts, maids, and servants. If I hired a bunch of servants and other subordinates without a steward to guide them, my days would be

wasted issuing tedious orders and calculating salaries. If I wanted to build a large organization, it was absolutely necessary to hire one.

I couldn't ask for a better man to fill that important position than Ild, the talented merchant whom I trusted wholeheartedly. I'd be lying if I said the thought of asking Mora to join me had never crossed my mind...not when she was a bona fide master of all forms of housekeeping. Plus, she'd remained a dear friend even after realizing I was nothing but a normal person on the inside. But that was beside the point!

"Wait, what about all of the business you've established with your caravan? What about your home here?" I asked.

"I will transfer the business and mansion to my cousin. I have already cleared this with the head of the Merchants' Guild—Chairman Zatow," he replied.

"But even Mora? What if more adversaries—like those daemonists—go after you again?"

"I hate to say this, but I believe we have associated with you enough that the risk is the same no matter where we go."

"Urk!"

"Furthermore, Mora was the one who brought this up with me. Even if I don't accompany you, I am certain she would leave to serve at your side."

"Absolutely!" Mora declared with hands on hips. Her adorable lips pursed into a big pout.

"...Nnngh..."

Ild posed a solid argument about the potential danger. The distance between my castle and their home in Relis would make it all the harder for me to reach them in time if they were suddenly attacked. *But gosh...I hate to tear a father and daughter from their normal lives...*

"Lord Margilus, we have put considerable thought into this over the past several days." Ild leaned forward to continue, while I fell into my usual habit of stewing silently. "As a petty merchant, nothing could be more exciting than the opportunity to support an endeavor that...might go down in history. I am not offering to serve you out of any sense of debt, but in pursuit of my own ambitions."

His own ambitions, huh? Is what I am trying to achieve worthy of his dreams?

"Besides...how do you intend to contend with the daily necessities and salaries when your staff grows to exceed a hundred?"

Or a thousand? All of your time will be consumed merely managing the castle, procuring supplies, and calculating salaries for your staff. Do you know of anyone else who is not only capable of these tasks, but also trustworthy?"

"When you get down, no one can cheer you up the way...uh, I guess Clara and Reyha can... Anyway, I can cheer you up, too!"

I didn't stand a chance against the logical case Ild presented, let alone the tear-jerkingly sweet words Mora offered. "...Very well. Actually, I should be the one asking the two of you. Ild, Mora, would you please come help me?"

"Of course! I shall devote all my energy to serving you."

"Thank you! I love you, Mister Geo!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Mora clung excitedly to my arm. I felt like I could do anything if I was rewarded with her smile at the end of it all—a smile as bright and radiant as the sun. ... *I suspect this is a taste of how the guys at the office with families felt when they were pushing themselves hard after hours...*

"Isn't that wonderful?"

"Congratulations, Lady Mora!"

The Four Dark Elf Sisters entered the room and began congratulating Mora. Evidently, they'd been somewhere nearby, watching the whole thing unfold. They looked ready to lift her up in celebration. *Those four really care about her, huh?*

"Master, I believe this goes without saying, but as your loyal Si, we swear to dedicate our hearts and souls to waiting on you. We shall serve you for all eternity." Suddenly kneeling before me, Reyha made this declaration. Out of all the dark elves, it just had to come from the one completely masking her presence.

"...R-right. I'm glad to have you all on board," I replied. *You're coming on way too strong... Er, I mean, I appreciate the sentiment... I just wish you'd stop popping up without any warning, sheesh. I swear, this can't be good for my heart.*

I held interviews with the staff willing to accompany Ild, Mora, and me to Castle Getaeus.

"It is our job to look after the master and young lady," said Sam.

“Wherever they go, we will follow.”

“Now that you’re going to be our head master, we’ll naturally work hard for you as well,” added Anna.

The elderly couple smiled sweetly as they lowered their heads in unison. I could have sworn they were younger before, but they had been the two escorting Mora when I ran into her at the gate my first time visiting Relis. They were the longest-serving members of the staff, having worked under Ild’s father. The help they provided with the cleaning and most of the mansion chores made them invaluable members of the household.

“I’ve never worked on a castle before, but I’ll do my best!” exclaimed the robust young man named Zek. His eyes were glistening with excitement. Primarily entrusted with carpentry work, he was the son of another servant who went back a long way with Ild’s family. From what I gathered, he was an able hand at all sorts of repairs, helping to maintain caravan wagons and fix up the mansion.

“I realize it won’t be easy adjusting to a completely new environment, but I’m glad to have you.”

Now the livelihood of these three, not just Ild and Mora, rested on my shoulders. Under the weight of that pressure, my head fell limply against my chest.

I managed to recruit the people I needed to maintain the inside of the castle. As icing on the cake, the irrepressible virago Clara was even going to join my party. Technically, that was just a temporary assignment by the Sorcerers’ Guild, but in my mind, she was already a full-fledged part of the family.

Now that I have her, I should go ask the other person I desperately want to join the team. My mind made up, I paid the adventurer Sedam a visit...at his home.

“It’s the real Lord Magician!”

“Don’t you beat up daemons with Daddy?!”

“Come on, drop some meteors! Kabooooom!”

“Gosh, I’m sorry about this,” Sedam apologized. “I didn’t mean to make you come all the way out here.”

A scene unlike anything I’d expected unfolded before me in Sedam’s home. The building itself was a splendid three-story house, suitable for an upper-class citizen. However, it still felt cramped, what

with three children running around and a beautiful wife diligently chasing after them.

“Sorry, but I wasn’t expecting this...”

“I get that a lot,” Sedam replied with a wry grin. I’d pictured him in seclusion in some shack in the forest. I certainly hadn’t pegged him as the marrying type.

I’m pretty sure he said that he’s thirty-two years old. I shouldn’t be surprised he has a wife and kids at this age... Dang, this makes asking him a lot harder.

“Ild has already filled me in. Didn’t you come out here to insist on me becoming your subordinate?”

“You’re as sharp as ever... However, I don’t want you as my subordinate.”

He already knew the reason for my visit. Not only that, it looked like he’d been considering the idea for a while now. Neither his wife nor the children made any fuss (well, the children were making a fuss, but not over that).

“Not as your subordinate? Would you prefer if I said ‘vassal,’ then?”

“No, that’s not what I meant... I can’t say this will be made official, but I’d like you to think of me as your friend or colleague.”

In all reality, there was no way I could treat a veteran adventurer rich with actual combat experience as my inferior. This was someone who’d traveled the lands of Sedia with blade in hand for over a decade. It probably wasn’t wise to start the organization off with an ambiguous hierarchy, but I felt even more strongly that it would spell my doom if I didn’t clear up this misunderstanding between us.

“I’m in, either way,” Sedam agreed casually with a nod. “Subordinate, minion, colleague, whatever.” *Doesn’t leaving his family to live in Castle Getaeus bother him at least a little?*

“Are you sure you don’t need to think this over more? What about your family...?”

“My wife can handle things here just fine. But while I won’t push for this right away, I would appreciate it if you came up with a way for me to live with my family eventually.”

“...That’s a perfectly natural request. You’ve got it. I can’t say for sure how yet, but I will make arrangements for you all to live together as soon as possible,” I promised.

I bet we'd be able to bring his family over within a few years after we get the living environment around Castle Getaeus in good shape. Assuming everything goes smoothly, that is.

"I appreciate it. By the way, what exactly is my position?"

"You'll need a salary, right? So I was thinking I could hire you as an adventurer on retainer for the time being. However, I want to stress that in my mind, we stand as equals. Companions in the same party."

I wanted Sedam and Clara both to freely offer their advice . Unlike Clara, I expected Sedam to quit the Adventurers' Guild. It technically made me his employer...but I sincerely doubted that would deter him.

"That's quite the honor!" Sedam exclaimed. "...All right, adventurer-in-service it is. Oh, I have one other request."

"I'll do anything within my means."

"I guess you could say I'm just throwing this in. You see, it's got to do with my...dream."

"Your dream?" I asked with a tilt of my head. I was surprised to hear that word come from such an extremely realistic and intellectual man.

"Don't laugh, okay? ...My old man was actually a pretty famous scholar in the Kingdom of Shrendal."

"Oh, so that's where you get it from! I'm not surprised."

That explains his wealth of knowledge and love of learning. I noticed there were books and scrolls scattered all across the house.

"He's already passed away, but my old man spent his entire life searching for something. Truth be told, the whole reason I became an adventurer was in the hopes I'd run across it someday."

"What is it? From the sound of it, it must be pretty amazing."

"Well, I guess you could say that," Sedam replied. In an unusual display of mild embarrassment, he began to rub the back of his head. "It's Qadr Brueys, the library from the age of gods. The first humans to come to the Sedian continent built that library. There, they stored all their knowledge about the beginning of this world. As you can imagine, the generally accepted opinion in the academic world is that the library doesn't actually exist."

"...And what about you?" I asked.

"Can't say. But if I find any leads on Qadr Brueys...I want you to help me search for it. Can I count on you to do that?"

From the look on his face, Sedam didn't seem to really believe we would uncover this mythological library. For him to bring it up anyway, I suspected he was counting on my magic to a certain degree. But even more than that, there was probably a part of him that wanted to pursue his dream.

"Of course. We'll definitely have to find it someday."

"S-sounds good, then."

As far as I was concerned, he might as well have said, "I know a place where you can learn all the secrets of this world." With any luck, I might learn the Watcher's true identity, or discover why he transported me to Sedia in the first place.

Needless to say, I promised to help Sedam search for Qadr Brueys so passionately that I'm pretty sure it put him off a bit. On that note, we bound the deal with a hardy handshake.



For the time being, I had all the hands I needed to work at Castle Getaeus. Gathering a crew for the castle was only a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. Nevertheless, I felt it still counted as a step in the right direction.

I wanted to set out for the castle right away, but in reality, I was stuck in Relis for another three days. For one thing, that was how much time it took to make preparations to transport a total of nearly thirty people and gather the supplies needed to support them for a while. Admittedly, Ild did almost all of the work; I just provided the funding...

Procedures to officially form an alliance with Relis also held me up. Some members of the city council were still wary of me, but I managed to win them over. I never could have done it without Brauze's full support. The announcement of plans for a concerted effort with the Sorcerers' Guild to bolster city defenses by deploying golems also helped tremendously. *Of course, I suspect their decision was in no small part swayed by the fact it would get me to leave Relis and establish a stronghold at Castle Getaeus.*

The highlights of the alliance could be summarized into the following points:

Relis City acknowledges Geo Margilus's complete dominion over Castle Getaeus and the surrounding territory.

Relis City and Geo Margilus hereby enter an alliance with regard to all matters pertaining to anti-daemon countermeasures.

Relis City will encourage other city-states in the Ryuse Alliance to form alliances with Geo Margilus under the same terms.

The nature of the alliance should make future operations in the area surrounding Relis easier to conduct. Now only that, I could use my relationship with Relis as a foothold to form cooperative relationships with the entire Ryuse Alliance—maybe even the Kingdom of Shrendal.

By coming to this city, I'd made a good start on achieving the goals I'd set for myself. I could step forward with firm determination.

"We're finally ready to go."

Everyone was gathered in the square before Relis City's gate. We

had five wagons and five mounts. Before that group of twenty-seven, I was overcome with emotion. The party consisted of the sorceress Clara Andell, the adventurer Sedam, Sedam's party members (the warriors Djirk and Ted, the scout Fijika, and the warrior-priest Torrad), the merchant-turned-steward Ild, Ild's daughter and my head housekeeper Mora, the gardener Sam and his wife, the cook Anna, the carpenter Zek, the assassin-turned-spy-master Reyha, and the Four Dark Elf Sisters, who served as spies and maids. Then there were the three former Mage Knight cadets Log, Daya, and Tel, who were going to become my golem artificer pupils. Last but not least, there were seven other former Mage Knight cadets, but they were supposed to join the Calbanera Knights at some later date.

Seeing everyone gathered in one place made for a truly impressive sight. *And to think, I only ever had three or four people work directly under me back when I was a businessman...*

It came as a shock when I learned Sedam's entire party was joining us, but none of them other than Sedam had families of their own to worry about. As a result, they accepted his invitation without batting an eye.

"Lord Margilus, please share a few brief words with us before we depart." Ild's tone brooked no argument.

Hearing that, all eyes fell on me in an instant. Even the crowd of onlookers stared! I couldn't help but gulp nervously. From now on, their futures and livelihoods rested on my shoulders. As if reconfirming the weight of that burden, I ran my eyes over each of their faces.

Clara, Sedam, Ild, and Mora looked the same as always. Ild's staff also looked upon me with a clear and abiding trust. The former Mage Knight cadets met my gaze with hope glistening in uncertain eyes. The dark elves knelt with their heads lowered. I could sense the strong devotion they always displayed in the perfection of their form.

As I looked upon each of them, an emotion unlike anything I could have imagined in Japan began to well within. *Responsibility? No, I'm no stranger to that. But what's this other feeling? It's like I'm eager to lead them to protect the masses... Oh, is this the sense of purpose that propels leaders?*

Their faith in me is nourishing my own personal growth... Then again, my emotions might just be getting the best of me.

"My friends, I wish to offer you my sincerest gratitude to you for joining me once more," I began. An edge of uncertainty still remained, but the sense of purpose I felt right now told me what to say. I needed

to assure these people that they'd made the right choice.

"We are about to depart for Castle Getaeus. At the moment, it is nothing more than a small castle in the middle of nowhere. However, I believe that if we work together, we can turn it into the mightiest of fortresses—a bulwark for defending humanity from daemons!"

"As your loyal Si, we swear by our ancestors to serve our Olry, Master Margilus, even should darkness devour the earth!" The dark elves shouted their words of loyalty in unison a heartbeat after I finished my speech.

"On behalf of the Sorcerers' Guild, I will do everything within my power to assist the wizard, Lord Geo Margilus."

"And, ah, I look forward to working with you," I said to the group.

Clara curtsied elegantly with the tip of her cloak in either hand and Sedam shot me his usual grin. Going by how everyone else applauded, pumped their fists in the air, and cheered in response to my little speech, I guessed it was a hit. But when the surrounding bystanders started clapping and shouting, the whole thing became unbearably embarrassing.

"All right, let's head out!" I shouted.

"Yes, my lord!"

"Quickly," I urged. And with that, we departed for Castle Getaeus.

Chapter 6

BACK WHEN I'D LEISURELY WALKED along the Lawful Way with Clara to visit Relis for the first time, I'd never dreamed I'd return with wagons and companions.

"Lord Margilus, are you certain this is the right place?" Ild checked.

"Why do you ask?"

"I-It's a dead end..."

Right on schedule, we reached Castle Getaeus in three days. Despite standing before it, apparently Ild and the children couldn't see the castle. *Well, no surprise there.* After struggling up the narrow mountain path, they were rewarded with an empty plot of land leading to a sheer cliff.

"Yes, this is the spot. I *lifted it up* to prevent anyone from breaking in," I answered.

"You what?!"

Ignoring the bewildered Ild, I began to cast my spell. "Open, Gate of Magic..."

Directing my consciousness toward the inner depths of my mind, an imaginary image of myself appeared in the inner world. My imagined self beheld the black-lacquered gate that appeared before me.

"...I'll need to get to the bottom of this one of these days."

My imagined self ran fingers along the surface of one of the gateposts, made from black stone. The sensation of cold, hard stone against my fingers was a testament to how firmly the image was rooted in my mind. Yet having seen a similar one inside the daemon nest I'd destroyed, the sight of this one filled me with mixed feelings. *Is the gate that summons daemons from beyond Sedia the same as my Gate of Magic?*

The Gate of Magic silently slid open. Beyond it waited the spiral stairwell that connected my mind to the chaotic realm.

"...Oops. This is no time to get lost in thought."

Regardless of how quickly I moved in the inner world, it would always take ten seconds for a spell to activate. But that didn't mean I should stick around longer than necessary. I began the descend the spiral stairs.

Eventually, my imagined self came to the sixth landing. A door stood there with a plate above it reading “Scholar’s Spellbook Archive.” If it wasn’t obvious from the number of levels, this was where the Rank 6 spells were stored.

The setup inside these spellbook archives was essentially the same regardless of rank. Nine elevated bookrests stood amid countless massive bookcases. Each book on a bookrest represented a single fully charged spell.

I touched one such book entitled *Structural Renovation*. As if it were alive with a mind of its own, the book began to flip through its own pages, releasing the chaotic energy known as “magical power.”

“As a consequence of this spell, I will control the land within a 360-meter radius of me and alter its shape at will. *Structural Renovation*.” My inner self and physical self chanted simultaneously. In the archive, the *Structural Renovation* spellbook began to shine brightly as it transformed into two ten-sided dice. The transformation complete, the dice fell into the palm of my hand.

“It’d be lame if I fumbled in front of everyone... Here goes nothing!”

The two dice tumbled dynamically across the bookrest. Dice rolls such as this were commonly used for activation checks in tabletop role-playing games. There was only a one-percent chance the spell wouldn’t activate. The two dice were used to obtain a number from 1 to 100. In the event I rolled a 100, the spell wouldn’t activate. (Furthermore, spells like *Fireball* that required a dice roll to determine damage didn’t require activation checks.)

Ild, Mora, and the children were staring intently at me in the real world. Even though I’d made sure I had two charges for *Structural Renovation* today, I wanted to avoid the embarrassment of a fumble if at all possible.

Fortunately, the two dice stopped on safe numbers. “Nice! *Structural Renovation*!”

Having successfully cleared the activation check, the magical power that converged into two dice grew indistinct once more as it flooded upward, overflowing into normal space.

Rumble! Rumble! Rumble!

“Wh-what is this?!”

“Eek!”

Due to the effect of the spell, the earth beneath our feet rumbled like thunder. Vibrations from the tremors felt like drums beating

against my stomach. Taken by surprise, fear washed across the faces of Ild, the servitors, and the children. Yet in a matter of seconds, those expressions were replaced with looks of astonishment.

“M-my word,” Ild gasped.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa... Th-the c-cliff is falling...”

“I don’t believe it...”

The steep cliff rumbled mightily as it came down right before our eyes. It didn’t even take ten seconds for the cliff, which had once towered like a skyscraper, to drop to ground level with us. On top of the flattened cliff stood the former bandit fortress that now served as our Castle Getaeus.

“Th-there really was a castle up there?!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

Poor Ild looked as if his knees were about to give out. The children were naturally no better off.

“Not long ago, we were just like them,” Mora observed.

“It’s scary what you can get used to,” Sedam agreed.

Sedam, Mora, and the others “used to” me apathetically watched over the dumbfounded children and servants, whose mouths gaped so wide it looked like they might dislocate their jaws.

I’d left Castle Getaeus unattended for a good while, but there was no sign of bandits having broken in. On the other hand...

“Ahh, look, this part collapsed during the move,” moaned Zek.

“Well, no wonder,” said Clara. “Castles aren’t made to be jostled around.”

I couldn’t blame the carpenter, Zek, for giving up on the castle walls as a lost cause. There were several spots that had collapsed, forming large, gaping holes in the stone. Just as Clara had so reproachfully said, the vibrations of moving it up and down like a toy had probably made the walls crumble.

...Well, this is a lesson in its own right. From now on, I’ll be sure to move it slowly.

With sunset soon upon us, I decided we should just do the bare minimum to patch up the openings in the castle wall. Unpacking could wait until the next day.

“I appreciate all of your hard work today, everyone. I realize we will only be busier tomorrow as we crack down on straightening up the castle, but I’d like you to take this night to enjoy yourselves to the fullest.”

“Yay!”

Having completed our first task as a group, we were about to spend our first night together at Castle Getaeus. It was only natural they’d want to kick off the night with a feast. Of course, I made sure to cast several spells as insurance against the unlikely event that something should happen.

Once we got a massive bonfire roaring in the courtyard, everyone pulled up benches and gathered around. Ild served a generous dinner with wine and dessert. Before long, the silent castle was bustling with excitement.

“All right, folks! I’d like to share my hidden talent with you!” True to Djirk’s words, the middle-aged warrior (actually, he was around the same age as me) shared an unexpected talent. He began to skillfully pluck a guitar-like instrument, filling the air with a jovial melody.

“I’m going to dance!” Argha proclaimed in her languid voice.

“Then I’ll sing,” Racil added politely.

“I’m playing too,” Gilma said bluntly, flute already in hand.

“Guess that’s two of us dancing!” Sasara exclaimed energetically. Without skipping a beat, the Four Dark Elf Sisters began to sing, dance, and play the flute in synch with Djirk.

“You shouldn’t hold back, either. Go on and eat all you want!” Mora encouraged.

“B-but...”

“Are you sure it’s okay for us to eat such expensive food...?”

“Mister Geo isn’t a stingy grump! You need to eat like a horse to grow like a weed and study like a beast!” Adopting the role of big sister, Mora admonished the boys and girls who were resisting the temptation of what was, by their standards, a lavish feast. As I watched the sweet sight unfold, I grew incredibly relaxed.

It wasn’t as though I’d spent years in this castle, but I was already growing quite attached to it. Or perhaps I was just getting a bit sentimental due to the sense of accomplishment from making it all this way with my companions...

I have to say, though, it was amazing how quickly Ild got drunk.

He was already drowning his sorrows.

“Jeez, why doesh that happen to ’im th’ second he takesh a shippa wine?”

“...And you’re one to judge? I’ll have you know, you’re quite drunk yourself,” Clara remarked.

“Well, one night won’t hurt. You need to break up hard work with some downtime,” Sedam said.

With head-on views of the dark elves’ performance and the bonfire, Sedam, Clara, and I had monopolized the best seats. It should go without saying, but Reyha was standing guard behind me.

“Well shaid! I knew you’d undershand, Shedam!” I exclaimed. Having countered the heartless wench’s remark with the burning passion of our manly camaraderie, I slapped the rogue heartily on the back.

“...That having been said, things are going to start getting busy around here tomorrow. For starters, we need to fix up the inside of the castle... Oh, and one more thing,” Sedam said, scowling in annoyance as I kept giving him fond, hearty slaps to the back. Alas, friendship between men was a fickle beast.

“...What is it?”

“You should recruit soldiers. No matter what you do, you’ll want to have some,” Sedam advised.

“That’s a good suggestion. To be honest, I’m surprised you’re trying to form your own organization here without any,” agreed Clara.

“Hrn...” Thanks to their much-appreciated words of wisdom, I completely sobered up.

Despite the buzzkill, when I finally found my bed there in Castle Getaeus, it was the most welcoming thing in the world. It felt like I’d enjoyed sleeping in it for ages. The situation was so different from the last time I’d stayed there—back when I got carried away with the idea of a secret hideaway—it made my head swim.

“This is the starting point. It all begins from here...”

Chapter 7

FIRST THING the next morning, the whole lot of us began moving into the castle in earnest. We began with cleaning every inch of the interior and patching up damaged areas the best we could. From there, we brought in the household belongings, daily necessities, and rations to make it livable.

“Djirk and Ted, air out the bedding in the courtyard and then take it to the bedrooms. Sam and Anna, inspect the wells and organize the kitchen. Mora and the dark elves, clean the main tower and switch out the furniture. Give top priority to Lord Margilus’s private room and bedroom.” It was outright mesmerizing to watch servants, adventurers, cadets, and even dark elves leap to carry out the assignments that briskly rolled off Ild’s tongue.

Given that the Order of the Calbanera Knights had used the castle in their last operation to exterminate daemons, the actual buildings hadn’t suffered severe damage. Combined with the fact that Zek’s carpentry skills proved better than anticipated, repairs were coming along nicely...aside from the spots along the castle wall I’d brought down.

Helming the cleaning brigade, Mora made the inside of the castle squeaky clean with the help of the Four Dark Elf Sisters and the children. Sedam and the other adventurers bounced around, spending some of their time on jobs that required muscle and some of it on delicate tasks such as sewing curtains.

Sitting with my back turned to the courtyard—which was filled with the lively voices of everyone working together—I let out a contemplative groan. Clara made an almost identical noise from her seat on the opposite side of the table.

“For the time being, why don’t we put the children in the soldiers’ quarters?” Clara asked.

“Yeah, it’s just the right size for the ten of them. Seeing as seven are going to leave to join the Calbanera Knights, let’s go ahead and keep them together until then,” I agreed.

“Since Sam and Anna are a married couple, they should stay in the same servants’ quarters...and then we could put Mora and Fijika in the room next door,” she continued.

“It’s not like we’re using all of the rooms,” I protested. “Why don’t we let those two have their own private quarters?”

“The castle is only going to get more crowded, so it’s wise to get them used to being crammed together from the start. Those two get along well enough,” Clara explained. “I don’t expect there to be any problems.”

“Well, okay...”

A rough map of Castle Getaeus was spread across the table, sketched courtesy of Sedam. We were in the middle of discussing how to allocate the castle’s living quarters. Not that it was much of a discussion. In truth, Clara probably did all of the work, while I merely bobbed my head in agreement.

Still, it really shows Clara is the daughter of nobility, the way she simply assumed she’d get a private room of her own. Then again, I’m in no position to judge her after I claimed the entire upper portion of the main tower as my personal living space. I gave myself everything from a private sitting room and bedroom to the study and roof.

“The attendants’ quarters are meant to hold five total, so it’s perfect for the dark elves,” Clara pointed out.

“Uh-huh...”

“That won’t be necessary, madam. You do not need to waste a valuable room on us,” Reyha said.

“.....”

True as the cock crows, Reyha was kneeling dutifully by my side. Although she was no longer under the (incorrect) assumption that Clara was my wife, she still addressed her with the title owed to the mistress of a household. From the looks of it, Clara had given up correcting the dark elf. I personally started to think of it as just another one of the dark elves’ unique titles of respect.

I was far more concerned about their lack of *self-respect* than the titles they called *us* by. *Bluntly put, the dark elves are too subservient. These past few days, everyone has started to warm up to them, but they’re still acting like they’re slaves.*

“Uh...Reyha...”

“Reyhanalka. If you mean to call yourself his servant—his Si—you must avoid statements that could taint your master’s reputation,” Clara told her, while I was still floundering for the right words. Her tone reminded me of an adult reasoning with a child.

“Madam?”

“What if your choice lowered his esteem in the eyes of others...? Some might take it to mean the magic user Geo Margilus is not even powerful enough to properly care for his servants.”

“Eh...?! Th-that is not what I meant...!”

“Did you know most nobility believe you can judge the caliber of a lord by his servants, and the caliber of the servants by their lord? If you take pride in being his servant, you need to accept treatment befitting your station in a dignified manner,” Clara continued.

“M-madam...” Reyha appeared deeply touched by Clara’s words of wisdom. Her purple eyes even grew misty with tears! As expected of a noblewoman, Clara made a perfectly logical argument. It wasn’t the sort of idea that would ever occur to me, not after being indoctrinated in the belief that equality was essential in all facets of life.

“Oomph!” While I was gazing upon the powerful emotions written on Reyha’s visage, my hand cupped over my mouth, Clara dug the tip of her boot into my shin. *It’s just like her to kick me somewhere Reyha can’t see.*

“.....!” Clara was intently trying to get something across as she shifted her eyes toward the dark elf.

...I guess this is her way of trying to help me out.

“I-It’s as she says, Reyha. I intend to make great use of the abilities you and the other dark elves have demonstrated in the times to come. Would you allow me to treat you with the respect you deserve? That way, when other talented individuals see how well you live, they will leap for the chance to serve me,” I said.

Recalling the old Chinese saying “Make happy those who are near, and those who are far will come” (although the meaning was closer to “great oaks grow from small acorns” in one of the modern Japanese translations), I tried my best to get that idea across. *Plus, it’s true that I want to treat the dark elves accordingly.*

“Master... Madam... I am unworthy of such a great honor...!”

Clara and I are trying to tell you there is no need to act so self-effacing... Well, I guess we can work on this one baby step at a time.

After exchanging ideas in this manner, Clara and I managed to finish determining room assignments. The rooms on the map were allotted as follows:

Main Tower

Third Floor – G. Margilus

Living Quarters

Knights' Quarters × 5 – Sedam/Clara/Ild/Unoccupied × 2
Zek
Attendants' Quarters × 2 – Dark Elves × 5/Torrad, Ted, Djirk,

Servants' Quarters × 3 – Sam, Anna/Fijika, Mora/Unoccupied
Soldiers' Quarters × 2 – Former Mage Knight Cadets × 10

Fortunately, no one seemed to mind the arrangements.

Shades of twilight consumed the forest below the main tower as stars began to glisten in the sky above. I was basking in that view upon the roof of Castle Getaeus's main tower.

“Fwaah...!” I groaned as I stretched out. I was enjoying a bath after a hard day's work and a nice dinner.

Sedians were no foreigners to the concept of bathing (they simply didn't bathe daily like we do in modern Japan). As a result, Castle Getaeus came equipped with its own private “bathtub.” That was a generous use of the word for the large, wooden tub. Without gas or plumbing, filling the tub required heating the water and hauling it up. I thought it'd be fulfilling to draw my own bath, but...

“Mister Geo, do you need more hot water?”

“N-no, I'm good. This feels great,” I answered.

I was stuck leaving all of the preparations to Mora, after she caught me getting ready to carry the bathtub outside. I had no choice but to entrust everything to her able hands. Reyha and the Four Dark Elf Sisters came in full force to heat and haul the water, ensuring I got a hot bath. A hot bath! Finally! It was like heaven on earth...

“I feel awful about putting you young ladies through all this hard labor over my bath... Are you sure I can't just use some sort of spell instead...?”

“I don't think of it as hard labor at all! From now on, you're officially m-my l-lord and master, so try to act the part!” Mora said.

“Hmm...”

I see. This is the flip side of what Clara told Reyha earlier today, I realized. If they genuinely wanted to exert themselves for me, I should be happy to receive their assistance.

“...Not to change the subject, but I'd like to get out now.”

“Okay! I’ll wipe you off,” Mora offered.

Nope. Sorry, but that’s one thing I can’t accept your help with.

“Lord Margilus, please look this over,” Ild said.

The next day, Ild and Sedam presented a wooden tablet with notes scribbled across it. It was a compilation of the tasks we needed to complete going forward. The list contained the following three points:

Assume control of the villages within the domain.

Recruit soldiers to guard the castle and roads.

Secure a source of financial revenue.

While I was surprised by how quickly the two men had assessed our situation, I didn’t like the sound of one of the items.

“‘Villages within the domain’? What is that supposed to mean? Isn’t Yulei Village the only one anywhere near here?” I asked. If memory served correctly, Yulei Village was part of the Calbanera Knights’ domain.

“Get it together! Don’t you remember those Calbanera Knights telling us about a hunting village and a woodcutters’ hamlet in the Endless Forest just the other day?” Sedam was incredulous.

...So, these woods are called the “Endless Forest,” huh? Now that he mentions it, this does sound vaguely familiar. If I remember right, I’m pretty sure I told them I’d protect the villages, too.

“I’d forgotten about that... Does ‘within the domain’ mean what I think it does? Do those villages belong to us?” I asked.

“I wish you would say ‘me’ instead of ‘us,’ but yes...that is what it means. You can demand taxes or labor, but in exchange, you will be obligated to protect them,” Ild explained.

“Now hold on a moment. I only received the castle from the Calbanera Knights. No one said a word about any villages,” I protested in a cold sweat, only for Sedam and Ild to exchange puzzled glances. *Why do they look so surprised?*

“Lord Margilus, the whole reason why we *have* castles is to defend the land. It is only natural for the surrounding territory to belong to the lord of the castle. I can say with absolute certainty that the three villages in the Endless Forest are yours,” Ild explained.

“Hasn’t Relis already proclaimed that it recognizes you as the

owner of the castle and its surrounding territory? So you won't run into any issues," Sedam said, doing his best to reassure me.

"I have nothing but issues with this," I muttered, ornery.

Ugh... I get the feeling it's too late to go back and say, "I don't need ownership of all this after all!" And even if I could, those three villages would be bereft of a lord to protect them if I relinquished my title to the castle and land. *The weight of my responsibility just got a lot heavier...*

"Master!" As always, Reyha was waiting to be of service behind me. However, it was extremely rare for her to enter a conversation that didn't directly involve her.

"Huh? What is it, Reyha?" I asked.

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I sincerely doubt there is a single soul who wouldn't rejoice to live on the land of my master, the great magic user, who hides not from the world!"

"....."

Reyha was probably trying to voice her opinion in her own unique way, in light of yesterday's conversation... *I can't act like I'm unworthy after what I just told her. Come to think of it, this is a perfect example of yet another modern variation on an ancient Chinese theme! "Put your money where your mouth is."*

"...You've made your point. In that case, I shall visit the different villages within the next few days to let the people know they can sleep more easily at night with me as their new lord." I'd already recovered from the shock of obtaining three villages without even realizing it.

When you get down to it, I'm planning to establish a decent-sized organization out of this castle. I can handle looking after three or four villages on the side! Such uncharacteristically optimistic thoughts never would have crossed my mind if not for the trust and support of my friends.

Ild had said I could collect taxes from the villages, but I decided to hold off on that for the time being. Although I had every right to collect them, it wasn't as if there was some sort of penalty if I didn't. *I should probably see what condition they're in first and then go from there.*

"Next on the list is the soldier issue I mentioned to you before," said Sedam. "With you here, we have nothing to fear in terms of

combat strength. But from now on, you're going to be responsible for ensuring that your roads and territory remain safe. You can't afford to spend every day patrolling the land, can you?"

"So it's necessary to hire a minimum of twenty—ideally thirty—soldiers," Ild added.

Preserving the peace, huh? Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure that was the whole reason why the captain of the Calbanera Knights said he was transferring the castle's title to me in the first place.

"Understood. But how will we get the soldiers?" I asked.

"I will go to Relis to recruit them. I'm sure the openings will fill quickly," Ild said confidently.

Being a soldier wasn't exactly a popular occupation in this world where the daemon threat was very real, but a great number of people wanted to work under the "Great Wizard." *A bunch of people out there hate and fear me, but I guess the opposite is also true.*

"I appreciate it, but it'd be a pain in the neck if any of them were like the donkey in the lion's skin..."

"Huh? What's a lion? ...Never mind, I understand what you are trying to say. I will be sure to interview each candidate and select only the most suitable individuals," Ild replied with a nod. My classical reference was lost on him, but he seemed to get the gist of what I was saying and approve. *He really is amazing!*

"Also, I'd prefer it if they weren't tied down with a wife and family. Above all else, they need the strong aspiration to defend human lives from daemons," I added.

"Aspiration," huh...? I shouldn't cringe over my own word choices, but dang, that makes our organization come across awfully idealistic. Sketchy, even. Then again, if I'm going to use my full abilities as a powerful magic user, setting our ideals to unrealistic heights sounds just right.

Needless to say, the addition of the soldiers meant we would need staff to look after them. As such, we added more servants to the recruitment list. Normally, it was possible to gather peasants from the villages under my control to work in the castle as an alternative to paying taxes. However, the circumstances for my castle were a bit unique.

"So, what about funding?" I asked, moving on to the last of the three items on the agenda.

"Thus far, you have provided the funding for everything at your own expense, but we cannot continue like this forever," Ild said.

“No, I suppose not.”

“As things stand now, the income stream from taxing your villages and tolling merchant caravans would be a measly trickle. You need to create some sort of revenue source,” Ild said.

I naturally had to pay Ild, Sedam, and the others. Why, simply the cost of feeding thirty soldiers wouldn't be cheap. While I had enough gold in my Infinity Bag to keep everyone in the castle well fed for a hundred years, I could see where Ild was going with this. *If our organization can't financially support itself, it can't be considered successful.*

“Fortunately, I am on good terms with the Axeholm dwarves. I suggest we open trade with them. Also, I would like you to consider building a road that connects their city with Castle Getaeus and Relis.”

“Axeholm?” I tilted my head, puzzled by that unfamiliar name.

Apparently, Axeholm was a self-governing dwarven city-state connected to Yulei Village by a trade route. With their advanced engineering and smithing skills, the dwarves were known for selling top-quality metal products to humans across the land, as well as accepting large-scale construction projects.

Since he was originally a merchant, Ild's caravan made countless trips between Relis and Axeholm. *Between his experience and connections, there shouldn't be any issues opening trade with Axeholm. That just leaves the matter of the roads.*

“I can see why you've got an interest. Are you suggesting we make this castle the staging post for trade between Axeholm and Relis?”

Ild nodded. “That's exactly what I'm suggesting. At present, our only option is to take the Lawful Way to Yulei Village and then the trade route to Axeholm. It'd take six days for us to get there by foot. If you could build a road cutting almost directly from Castle Getaeus to Axeholm, the travel time would probably drop to four days. Furthermore, the roads would be under our jurisdiction, increasing the safety considerably.”

So, this is what it means to be “like a fish in water.” Ild was truly bursting with excitement as the merits of building the roads flew off his tongue. *I have to admit, it sounds like a sweet deal overall, going by what he's said so far.*

“Isn't all the land between the castle and Axeholm nothing but forest and wilderness?” Sedam pointed out. “Won't building the thing burn through time and money?”

He's acting just like those annoying jerks in the office who tear their subordinates' suggestions apart, I thought irritably to myself as I turned to hear what Ild had to say on the matter.

"In general, I don't expect you to run into any problems if you commission the Axeholm dwarves to handle the construction. Also, I have a question for you, Lord Margilus... Would it be possible for you to use your magic to assist with the road construction? For example, could you use the spell from the other day to control the earth...?"

That is a truly clever question on Ild's part. He's right, I could do that! Jeez, I can't believe it never occurred to me.

"Good thought. If I use *Structural Renovation*, I bet we'd make pretty good time."

"And if you use that one spell to summon those fiends—er, I mean, ogres—or minions along that line, couldn't you cut down labor fees big time?"

"I like it!" I leaped on Sedam's idea. In exchange for only being able to create ogres, the spell *Create Ogre Platoon* boasted the longest activation time of any of the *Create Monster* spells, with its three-day duration. It was necessary to keep them under careful watch, but a single ogre was equivalent to ten human laborers. *Why, instead of limiting this to ogres...*

"I can also create giants, which are bigger than ogres. They don't last as long, but they're like getting to use several bulldozers and excavators for free. We have this in the bag!"

"Bull-what...? At any rate, I'm amazed you can even create giants. Well, I guess if you can whip up dragons, of course you can make giants. It sounds like this construction is going to be quite the sight," Sedam said.

"Giants, you say...? If you can create giants..." Holding his chin in his hand, Ild began to contemplate something.

He sure looks smart right now, I thought dumbly as I waited to hear what he had to say.

"It's necessary to clear a great deal of the forest in order to build the roads. But if you look at it another way, you will obtain that much timber in the process. Why don't you sell the wood to the Axeholm dwarves?"

"...Oh, I get it. That's a good idea."

According to Ild, Axeholm was constantly in need of wood for construction or fuel due to its rocky terrain. Even now, the majority of merchants traveling from Relis via Yulei Village to trade with

Axeholm primarily sold timber.

“Bluntly put, the Axeholm dwarves are extremely wealthy. If you can sell a necessity such as wood to them at wholesale, it will turn a handsome profit,” Ild explained.

“Oh, I see...”

Trade relations was one sector I’d never dealt with during my life as a businessman. So while I couldn’t truly wrap my head around the particulars, I could tell how amazing Ild’s scheme was just from the way his eyes sparkled as he laid it out for me.

“If you establish trade with Axeholm, merchants from Relis will flock to Castle Getaeus. You could expect to turn a handsome profit from tolls and boarding fees.”

Quick to act on his idea, Ild set out for Axeholm to open trade negotiations with the dwarves the very next day. Not only was he going to discuss the roads and trade, he was also going to commission them to repair the castle wall. I knew there wasn’t a better man for the job. With Sedam and his party of adventurers assigned as Ild’s escorts, there was nothing to worry about on the safety end of things, either.

Ild and the others returned only two weeks after departing to negotiate with the dwarves. During that time, I completed a task of my own: I dropped off seven of the former Mage Knight cadets with the Calbanera Knights.

Alnogia, Gillion, and Leoria welcomed the children with open arms. The captain’s sickly constitution was a cause for concern, but I hoped the Calbanera Knights and I could remain on amiable terms.

Ild returned with a group of short, brawny, bearded men—er, I mean, dwarves. Their leader introduced himself as Valbo, chief of House Dauron, who were noted architects. Hammers, chisels, rulers, writing utensils, and countless other materials hung across them. All sorts of tools were set across their backs, along their waists, and all over their squat bodies.

From what I gathered, it was customary in dwarven society for one extended family—or clan—to preside over a single trade.

“Architecture” would be an important trade even in Axeholm. *I’m lucky the chief was willing to personally come all the way out here.*

“Ooh! Bit of a wee thing, but a fine castle of solid build! Would ye be Lord Margilus? Wi’ us on the job, we’ll have that crumblin’ wall good as new in no time!” Valbo exclaimed.

“I am indeed the magician called Margilus. I appreciate your assistance in this matter. I am also looking forward to working with you on the road construction.” I took Valbo’s hand and gave him a hearty handshake—his grip was as hard and tough as any of the tools he carried. However, his face twisted unfortunately at the mention of the road.

“Aye? Ye mean ye’ll use ogres for construction an’ magic to move the ground? Well, uh...” Valbo vigorously pulled at his wiry, short beard in frustration as he trailed off hesitantly. *I’ve seen this reaction before...*

“I’m terribly sorry, Lord Margilus. I’m afraid I was unable to convince the dwarves your magic is real,” Ild whispered apologetically from just behind my shoulder.

“I see...”

During Ild’s negotiations with the dwarves, he was able to convince them to open trade with Castle Getaeus. However, they were withholding their decision on the road construction. They didn’t believe the part about how I would offer assistance with magic. *I swear, this happens every time.*

“If that is the only problem, I shall reveal the might of my magic to you right here and—”

“Wait, Margilus!”

It’s time for me to don the mask of the great magic user! I thought to myself and struck the most grandiose pose I possibly could only for Clara to poke me in the back. Seeing as she was essentially just an intern, it wouldn’t be amiss to call her behavior “rude.” Then again, this was Clara we were talking about. It was pretty respectful by her standards just to avoid punching or kicking me in front of the dwarves.

“...What is it?”

“Before you concern yourself with the dwarves, I believe you should earn the recognition of the people in the villages under your rule. As it is, you have utterly ignored them since we arrived over two weeks ago.”

The intern makes a valid point.

Chapter 8

THAT VERY DAY, I left to visit the villages in my domain. I instructed Valbo and the other dwarves to focus on repairing the castle wall for the time being.

Aside from me, members of the domain patrol included: Ild, Sedam, Reyha, Torrad, Djirk, Ted, and Fijika. I asked the Four Dark Elf Sisters to protect the castle along with Clara, whom I appointed my vice-regent. *But I have to admit, the idea that we're only going to split up like this more and more is pretty nerve-racking. Now I get all too well what everyone meant when they said we need soldiers.*

"The three villages in your domain are respectively known as Edgewood Village, Healwood Village, and Backwood Village." As we trudged along the barely visible path that ran through the dense greenery of the Endless Forest, Ild gave me a rundown of the villages.

Edgewood Village was the largest of the three, but even so, its population failed to hit two hundred. Nearly all of the villagers were woodcutters who hauled their wood clear to Yulei Village for sale.

Healwood Village, as one might infer from the name, benefitted from numerous types of medicinal herbs that grew plentifully in the area. Highly skilled healers had lived there for generations, making it a common place for merchants to visit.

The last of the villages, Backwood Village, was literally the village the farthest back in the forest. The people there primarily hunted to get by.

"Each village has its own well-defined characteristics," I appraised.

"Come again?"

"Sorry, forget it."

Fijika went ahead to deliver the notices to each of the villages that I was their new lord, but how would the people receive me? This forest had been under the control of bandits until just recently. *I hope they don't wind up saying, "We don't need a lord anymore! Chase him out of town!"*

We reached Edgewood Village, the closest of the three to Castle Getaeus, right before sundown. As the name implied, the village

enclosed behind a crude wooden fence was on the *edge* of a large pond. All of the buildings were made of wood and horribly run down, even compared to the ones in Yulei Village.

“...You’re slow,” Fijika complained, waiting for us at the entrance. A tanned man in his peak years was with her. He introduced himself as the village leader.

“We swear our fealty to you, our new lord and master.” The village leader didn’t so much as hesitate to drop to one knee and pledge allegiance on behalf of the village. Yet the expression on his face was steeped in fear and apprehension rather than hope and relief.

“And I shall strive to repay you for your loyalty. Did you give him the letter?” After speaking to the village leader, I turned to Fijika. *He shouldn’t be this scared if he read the letter Ild wrote for me.*

“I did.”

“I-Indeed, I had the privilege of reading your letter! It said you will temporarily e-exempt us from taxes... The entire village is most grateful!”

“Uh-huh...”

Is it possible he thinks this is too good to be true? I didn’t have a keen eye at discerning this sort of thing due to my egregious inexperience. Never in my life had I spent any time “looking down” at the “little people.”

“Lord Sor—Wizard!”

“Lord!”

“I pledge my loyalty to you!”

Villagers gathering on the green prostrated themselves upon the ground the moment they saw me. Although they seemed respectful enough, it was unpleasant how they shared the same look of fear as the village leader.

“I already mentioned this in the letter to your leader, but I would like to develop this village just as I am Castle Getaeus. I intend to start by improving the roads that connect you with the castle and the Lawful Way in the near future. I hope you will help me with this endeavor.”

“Yes, my lord!”

With the formalities out of the way, the village proceeded to throw a feast in my honor. In tune with their low spirits, it was a depressing party. The food and wine I was served looked somehow sickly compared to what Mora and the others had prepared for me

back at Castle Getaeus. I realized the village itself was impoverished, so I forced myself to down it with a smile.

Figuring it was the courteous thing to do, I gave the village leader a few dozen gold coins for all their trouble. When I did, suspicion instead of gratitude flashed across his face.

Based on what I learned from the leader, the three villages in the Endless Forest were indeed under the control of the bandits. The villages suffered horribly at their hands; the scoundrels periodically demanded food and valuables, and brutally slaughtered any who defied them as a warning.

After what they've been though, it's no wonder they aren't quick to trust strangers. When the village leader's daughter came to refill my wineglass during the celebrations, her hands were trembling violently.

That night, it was decided I would sleep in the village leader's house. Despite his respected position, the home was composed of just three rooms; it was no better than a log cabin. Seeing as all seven of us couldn't possibly cram inside, I got the den to myself while the village leader and his family slept in the adjacent room that looked like it was used for storage.

Ild and the rest of my group pitched tents on the village green. I naturally tried to sleep outside with them at first, but got roped into staying with the village leader when he insisted Edgewood Village couldn't possibly allow its lord to sleep outside. *Still, I feel awful about putting him and his family out like this. From now on, I'm roughing it outside no matter what anyone says. In all reality, it's probably more comfortable out there than on this musty pallet.*

"...I should get to sleep."

The livestock penned directly outside of the house were loud, and they stank. Desperate to get this night over with as quickly as possible, I closed my eyes to lost myself in sleep. (*...But if I'm their lord, isn't it my obligation to provide better lives for these people...?*)

"Master," whispered an alluring, husky voice, just beside my ear. Thoughts of a fledgling lord's duties swiftly vanished from my drowsy mind.

"Wha—?"

The silhouette of a mature woman was barely visible in the darkness. I thought I was going to have a heart attack for a split second—only to realize it was Reyha.

"I-Is there a problem?"

"I have apprehended your assailants," she answered.

“Assailants?”

With bleary eyes, I threw the robe over my head, illuminated the tip of my Staff of Wizardry with magic, and left the house. Directly in front of it was the village green. There, three young men lay bound upon the ground. A young lady sat nearby in a crumpled heap.

“...I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault!” cried the young lady (the village leader’s daughter, I noticed upon closer inspection). For some reason, she threw herself at my feet.

“Mmph! Mmmph!” The gagged young men struggled to break free as they glared hatefully at me.

Ild and the others who’d set up camp out here were wide awake. Exasperation was plainly written on their faces.

“What is going on here...?”

“Wh-what is going on here?!” Dashing out of the house shortly after me, the village leader shouted the very same words I’d said right before him. *I guess great minds think alike.*

“These three tried to sneak into your room bearing weapons, so I apprehended them. The girl was following behind the three.”

Flying into a rage upon hearing Reyha’s explanation, the village leader grabbed his daughter by the collar and shouted, “What?! Kina, what in the world were you thinking?!”

“I couldn’t help it, Dad! I...I couldn’t bear to go through with it... So Kell and the others, they...” Kina protested. Going by the girl’s response to her father’s outburst...

Essentially the village leader ordered his daughter to “entertain” me for the night in hopes of ingratiating himself with me. Not wanting to do that, Kina turned to her three lifelong friends for help. Mustering their (reckless) courage, they tried to snuff my lights out, huh?

“W-we weren’t going to kill you...”

“We were just going to scare you a bit so you’d give up on Kina...”

“A-and aren’t you actually that evil sorcerer, Jargle?! You can’t trick me with all your smooth talk!”

A name I hadn’t heard in ages flew from the mouth of one of the young men once the gags were removed. To be fair, the forest surrounding the village kept it isolated. *I suspect rumors about Geo Margilus make it here, but if they’re lumped together with the previous owner of the castle, Jargle... Well, it would hardly surprise me.*

“What shall we do with them, Lord Margilus?” Ild asked calmly

despite his exasperation.

Wait, “Do with them”?

“...By any chance, will my decision count as a court ruling?”

“According to the King’s Law, it most certainly will, since we’re in your domain. For the record, an attempt on the lord’s life is a crime rightfully punishable by death,” Ild explained.

“Master, with your permission, I will take it upon myself to execute them...after I make them suffer agony so great, it would make monstrosities of darkness wail.” Reyha certainly had a knack for the ominous.

The King’s Law was a legal system shared by the countries that had inherited the legacy of the Kingdom of Shrendal. I was in the middle of learning about it in detail from Ild and Clara, but I’d never expected to use my right as ruler to pass judgment so soon.

“And here I didn’t want to have anything more to do with trials...” Not that complaining would make the problem before me—or my duty to resolve it—magically disappear.

Pulling myself together, I addressed the three young men. “... Kell, Sacco, and Rye, was it? You were planning to take me on when you were under the impression I was an ‘evil sorcerer’ for the sake of your friend, Kina... Didn’t you think I might kill you?”

“...S-sure we did, but...”

“Several of my friends and fellow villagers lost their lives to Jargle and the bandits! I don’t care if I die if I can avenge them...!”

“K-Kina is my dear f-friend...”

“It’s all my fault! S-so, uh, if you must e-execute someone...p-please execute...m-me...”

The three young men and young woman desperately made their cases. The village leader merely stood aghast with lips quivering, the blood drained from his face.

I slightly raised my staff to silence the group before first addressing the dark elf. “Reyha.”

“Yes, master.”

“...I had you answer to the laws of Relis for your crimes. It is only fair I hold them to the law.”

“If that is what you wish,” she replied.

...Not that there is much of a law to hold them to. Even under the King’s Law, a lord essentially wielded full authority over his domain.

In other words, I was the law. *This is too much pressure!*

Forcing back the urge to start screaming and crying, I began mulling over the situation. Emotionally speaking, I didn't care to punish any of the boys. That said, I'd look weak if I acquitted them for attempted assault (or attempted homicide, depending on the viewpoint) against their lord.

"Hrrn..." If I was supposed to be the law, I should at least execute it in a way that satisfied everyone.

"You are guilty of attempted assault on your lord. However, I am partly at fault this time for failing to resolve a grave misunderstanding. Taking this into account...the three of you are ordered to serve forced labor at Castle Getaeus. The term is three years... Furthermore, you will be assigned the most difficult position: soldiers. You'd best brace yourselves."

"Y-you're making us castle soldiers?!"

"...I-I'll do it! I'll do anything if you don't execute me...!"

"Th-thank you..."

They probably interpreted the call to arms as purely punishment for their crime. Their faces were by no means beaming with joy, yet there was most certainly a hint of relief that they weren't condemned to die. The young lady broke into a great smile, tears streaming down her cheeks as she threw herself upon the other three. I was sure that sparing her alone made it worthwhile for them.

The village leader and other local spectators breathed heavy sighs of relief. If there was anyone I wanted to come down hard on, it was Kina's father, but I'd have to reconcile myself to letting him off with a sound scolding from Ild.

"I think that was a wise decision. We need soldiers who know this forest like the back of their hand," Ild whispered next to me. *Come to think of it, that's a good point.*

There is a legitimate possibility we could fight demons at the castle, so I might actually wind up cutting the lives of these three young men short, I thought with a heavy heart, but there was no going back on my decision to take up the mantle of lord.

"Anyway, aren't there two more villages? ...I sure hope I can get a decent night's sleep at the next one," I grumbled.

"We'll have to wait and see, but it is your duty as lord to resolve the problems your people bring forward," Ild replied dourly at the sight of my sour expression. "That holds true regardless who you are resolving the problem for."

Having completed our inspection at Edgewood Village, our party set out for Healwood Village. The village elder was an old woman from a long line of healers. Beloved by the other villagers, the clever old woman was something else.

Learning from our mistake in the last village, I sent Ild ahead to explain the situation in person before I made my appearance. As a result, discussions with the elder went smoothly.

“You can see we’re not much of a village, but that didn’t stop the bandits from milking us dry. If you are willing to keep us safe from now on, we will happily serve as your loyal subjects,” the elder swore.

“Of course. It’s a pleasure to officially accept you and your village into my domain, then.”

The elder said the population of Healwood Village was approximately 130, so I suspected the people were barely getting by. Just like with Edgewood Village, I not only promised to ensure the safety of the village and improve their standard of life, but also informed the elder I would not collect taxes for the time being. As could be expected, the elder and villagers were thrilled by such exciting news, but...

“I am terribly sorry, but to be honest, I have one more favor to ask of you.” The shriveled old woman shrank in on herself even more as she begged me to help...exterminate undead.

According to the village elder, just recently, undead soldiers suddenly began wandering the forest at night. Between the fact that they didn’t actively attack humans and didn’t appear near the village, thus far there hadn’t been any casualties. Unfortunately, they *did* appear in the same area as some invaluable herb clusters. At least on a financial level, their presence was devastating the village.

“It’d take money we simply don’t have to hire adventurers...and we can’t very well turn to the city troops or Calbanera Knights when we aren’t paying their taxes.” After hearing the village elder’s explanation, there was no way I could ignore their request as the lord of this land.

For someone accustomed to city life in modern Japan, the forest at night was surprisingly dark. Yet even my maladjusted eyes could make out my surroundings thanks to the pale white light of the moon

shining through the canopy of trees overhead—not to mention the phosphorescent glow emitted by our unearthly targets.

There were about twenty of these humanoid undead stumbling and staggering through the forest. The distorted double-file line they fell into only increased the creep factor.

They were possessed zombies. According to the warrior-priest Torrad, the spirits possessing the reanimated corpses took the form of a yellow glow that enshrouded their bodies. *I doubt it's a coincidence they share the same traits as D&B's "wights," but there's no way for me to prove it.*

The undead were equipped with battered armor and shields along with horribly chipped swords and spears. Emitting the occasional groan from bodies as shriveled as mummies, there was no doubt they were the walking dead.

"Army of darkness! This is the realm of the living!" Torrad planted himself before the marching undead and presented the holy symbol of the goddess he worshipped. Upon reciting verses from a sacred tome, blinding light began to shine down on the undead army. "In the name of the winter protector, Ashginea, I command you: Souls of the deceased, begone!"

"Grah! Argaaa...!"

"...Phsshhh... Urggle..."

"Wow! *Turn Undead!*" I couldn't help but exclaim in excitement from my position on standby with Sedam, Djirk, and Ted. We were supposed to be ready to leap into action the moment Torrad needed support.

Bathed under the holy light, the yellow glow that shrouded the decaying bodies began to dissipate as if it were evaporating. Free of the glow, or rather, of the spirits, the soldiers crumbled to the ground one after another. They were merely corpses once again.

Impressive as he was, not even Torrad could exorcise twenty possessed zombies all at once. But Djirk and Ted advanced to the front and fended off the remaining soldiers while he blasted them with another *Turn Undead*. The group of possessed zombies didn't even stand a chance when the divine light showered down on them a second time. *It's easy to see why they're respected as an elite adventuring party throughout the area, even over in Relis.*

"...I've checked the surroundings. No other undead are in the vicinity," Reyha said.

"Uh-huh." I only half-heartedly listened to the report Reyha

made after having combed the area for more enemies.

A bit giddy from seeing divine power in action for the first time, I amiably slapped Torrad's muscular shoulder. "Well done! I'm sure this will set the people of Healwood Village at ease."

"Indeed... It's just..." said the warrior-priest with a hint of sadness mixed with fatigue. When casting *Turn Undead*, there was a risk that a cleric would come into contact with the mind or memories of the target undead.

"These were soldiers drafted to fight against daemons in the War of Loss. I suspect they awakened when they sensed that daemon nest a little while back."

...Does that mean even the undead are enemies of the daemons? Come to think of it, I don't hear too much about "monsters" in this world other than daemons. For there to be enough work to warrant establishing "adventurer" as an actual job, wouldn't it mean there are other nasty things out there?

"Yeah, there sure are," Sedam said when I asked. "Of course, daemons are the nastiest of the bunch."

"Magical beasts and spirits like the ones we just fought are pretty common in remote areas," Ted explained.

Aside from the daemons, the monsters in Sedia could be broken into three broad categories: magical beasts, monstrosities, and the undead. Both magical beasts and monstrosities were creatures negatively influenced by mana in the natural world. The term "magical beast" described any wild animals, insects, and plants that had been "distorted by mana" and then branched off into their own independent species. On the other hand, monstrosities were creatures that partially transcended matter.

"Some common magical beasts we're hired to deal with include kobolds, fire spiders, and death's-head bees," Sedam said.

"I still haven't seen a monstrosity...not that I ever want to run into one," Ted added.

Yeah, I'm with you on that.

The next day...

"Hoo... Hoo..."

"I-I'm exhausted..."

“Huff... Huff... Huff...”

“Keep on pace! You can’t march too fast or too slow! One breath per step! Don’t change your gait!”

We were on the forest trail to our final destination, Backwood Village. Along the way, Djirk was training the three young men we’d unexpectedly enlisted in Edgewood Village. All of our equipment was strung across their backs. It wasn’t as if we were punishing or bullying the boys. According to Djirk, this was a common form of march training. Apparently, he’d actually served in a military unit once, which was why I placed him as commander of their training for the time being.

“A good eighty percent of a soldier’s job is walking. And if the entire army can’t cover the same distance at the same time, it’s useless in battle! I’ll be sure to hammer this point into them right from the start!” Torrad promised.

The image I had of soldierly training was more along the lines of repeating sword, spear, and assault exercises. *Leave it to an ex-pro to know how it’s really done...* For the record, this hike was a walk in the park compared to what the Mage Knight cadets had had to endure.

Fortunately, we managed to reach Backwood Village before the three new recruits collapsed from exhaustion. With a population of a hundred, it was the smallest of the three villages...and the most difficult to reach. Between the two, I could only imagine how horribly impoverished it would be.

In fact, some of the homes there were no better than pithouses. But going by the complexion and physique of the villagers, they seemed far healthier than the people in the other two hamlets. When I brought it up with the village chief, he explained that all of their hunters boasted such great skill that they never suffered for want of meat or furs. They also weren’t hit as hard by the bandits as the previous two villages, thanks to their distance from the bandit fortress (now Castle Getaeus). What’s more, they were able to defend themselves to a certain degree with their hunting skills.

“However, we are in need of more fruit and vegetables...as well as medicine,” said the chief.

“Understood. I’ll see what I can do. At any rate, your situation should improve once I repair the paths between the villages and castle.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!”

With his robust build and black beard, the village chief was the image of a professional hunter. Just like with Healwood Village, my

discussions with the village chief were going smoothly, free of any misunderstandings like the one that arose in Edgewood Village. The key was sending Ild to explain the situation before I arrived.

“Once the village is back on its feet, we will give a portion of our spoils to you as taxes.”

“I’d appreciate it. Oh, before I forget... I wish to recruit any volunteers you may have to work as soldiers at my castle. Do you have any lads who might be interested?” It wasn’t as if the incident in Edgewood Village had given me a taste for recruiting soldiers, but I figured a skilled hunter could prove useful in the future.

“This isn’t a mandatory draft, right? I will ask around...but I would not get my hopes up if I were you,” he answered.

“I understand. I won’t impose that on you, so forget I even mentioned it.”

The villagers appeared to carry out relatively fulfilling lives here. On the one hand, that was a relief to see, but on the other, the stress of knowing it was my responsibility to protect their way of life was already giving me an ulcer.

Having learned my lesson from Edgewood Village and the fiasco there, I made it a rule of thumb not to spend the night in these villages. As such, our group prepared to set out for the path home as soon as my conversation with the village chief drew to a close. Yet right as we were about to step out of the village, our party was forced to an abrupt halt when a young man fell in front of me.

“.....”

“M-my lord!”

“What do you want?” I silently motioned for the dark elf standing before me to fall back, before turning my gaze fully on the young man prostrated before me.

“R-right! I am Nox, a resident of this village! Please allow me to work in the castle!”

“Nox... Hmm...” As I studied the pale, stick-like lad, he lowered his head, a look of sheer desperation etched into his face.

I threw the village chief a sidelong glance that said, “This contradicts what you told me...” He met that meaningful glance with a knowing nod.

The village chief went on to explain that the lad was the son of a destitute merchant who had fled to this village over a decade ago. Having done business with the merchant a number of times, the villagers couldn’t simply turn him and his son away. Despite taking

the two in, the father soon succumbed to an illness. Ever since then, Nox had lived here in the village as dead weight.

“I don’t have the strength to learn how to hunt, so I’ve helped around the village in what little ways I can...but I don’t want to put them out more than I already have.”

“...Then what can you do?” Ild asked the pleading young man sternly. Although he was gentle and kind on the whole, I appreciated how Ild was a firm steward when it came to the castle.

“Uh, well, I can read and write... If it’s basic, I can also do some arithmetic.”

“Excellent! You’re accepted!”

What?!

“I-I am terribly sorry,” Ild apologized. “Lord Margilus, I did not mean to undermine your authority.”

“No, it’s fine. I have to admit, I’ve felt bad about all of the work you’ve had to handle alone. Let’s go ahead and hire him.”

“Thank you kindly! I will strive to do my best!”

Indeed, a great deal was being asked of Ild. Not only did he conduct negotiations with the dwarves, he also oversaw the castle chores and calculated salaries. If a local peasant could serve as his assistant, it certainly wouldn’t hurt. The village chief even vouched for the lad, claiming, “Don’t turn to Nox for muscle or hunting, but he has a sharp mind. I’m sure he will be of good use to you.”

Thus, all three villages were mine both in name and by oath. They were realistically too small for taxation, but whether that changed would depend on how well I governed the land. At least for now, the three new soldiers and Ild’s freshly recruited assistant could be considered pleasant surprises.

Speaking of Ild, instead of heading back to the castle, he set out for Relis with Nox in tow. They were going to recruit new soldiers and gather the necessary supplies... *Honestly, what would I do without him?*

As I walked back to Castle Getaeus with a considerably lighter step than I had on my way to the villages, a black shadow advanced

toward me. The shadow was Sasara, the youngest of the Four Dark Elf Sisters entrusted with protecting the castle.

“Master! Sister Reyha! ...I-I have important information to report!”

“What is it?” Reyha asked.

She definitely has bad news. While fear for the worst struck me speechless, Reyha asked Sasara to explain the situation on my behalf.

“The castle is currently under siege by a group of soldiers roughly thirty strong! Th-they claim to hail from the warrior clan!”

Chapter 9

SEVERAL DAYS had passed at Castle Getaeus since Geo and the others had left to inspect the domain. (This was only a few hours before Sasara met up with Geo).

Clara Andell was enjoying a cup of tea in her private chambers. The oldest of the Four Dark Elf Sisters, Argha, was serving her with the greatest respect.

“I’m honestly blown away by the dwarves and their craftsmanship! I never dreamed they could finish repairing the castle wall in such a short time,” Clara said.

The group of twenty Dauron dwarves had completely finished repairing the castle wall damaged by *Structural Renovation* only yesterday. Serving as the vice-regent, Clara finalized the contracts with Valbo and paid the construction fees on behalf of Geo, the lord of the castle.

It would reflect poorly on the castle if she allowed them to leave the moment work was done, so she threw a banquet that night to celebrate a job well done. It was no easy feat to entertain twenty heavy-drinking dwarves with bottomless pits for stomachs, but she managed to pull it off with the help of Mora, all of the staff who served under her, and the dark elves. Clara herself played the role of the lady of the castle flawlessly.

“Indeed, madam, their hearty appetites surprised me more than anything,” Argha confessed.

The dark elves still insisted on referring to Clara as “madam.” It was obvious she was neither legally nor emotionally bound in union with Geo. They could see and comprehend that the two weren’t married. Perhaps they chose this title for Clara out of the fear and respect she earned from them. She acted boldly as the vice-regent and freely spoke her mind as if an equal of their Olry. If they were compelled to serve him, then it was only natural that they serve her in turn.

“Madam!” A piercing voice bordering on a scream brought Clara’s leisurely time to an end. The youngest of the dark elves, Sasara, flew into the room.

“What happened?”

“So, I was keeping watch, yes? And then I saw a huge group of armored soldiers making their way toward us!”

“.....?!”

The two primary powers in this region—Relis City and the Order of the Calbanera Knights—acknowledged Geo as the lord of Castle Getaeus and the surrounding territory. For an unidentified battalion to approach their castle without sending word beforehand, something was clearly amiss. It wouldn't be the least bit surprising if they launched an attack on the castle!

The elegant smile of a noblewoman vanished from Clara's lips, replaced by the cold frown of a sorceress. “Give me a detailed report.”

“Th-there were approximately thirty soldiers. The insignia on their standard was of a bird I have never seen. Also, they will reach the castle within half an hour!” Although Sasara was the least mature of the four sisters, she was still of the “saboteur” Haiklus tribe. The dark elf quickly and concisely delivered all of the key information.

Clara mentally reviewed the hands available to her in the castle. There was Mora, Sam and his wife, Anna, the carpenter Zek, the Four Dark Elf Sisters, and the three former Mage Knight cadets. This was hardly a group capable of defending against an army.

“...Argha, gather everyone into the courtyard. Sasara and Racil, keep watch on the approaching troops... It won't be easy, but I'm counting on you.”

“Understood, madam!” the four replied in unison.

“We still do not know who these troops are. It is possible they are our allies. However, I would like the dwarves to wait with Mora and the others in the main tower just in case the worse should come to pass,” Clara informed the group gathered in the courtyard.

The main tower was the sturdiest structure in the castle. The first-floor entrance was a good two meters off the ground. If they burned the wooden staircase leading up to it, they could hold out for a surprisingly long time, despite their small numbers.

“I will see what has brought them here. Gilma, serve as my escort.”

“Yes, madam,” replied the third-youngest dark elf with a respectful salute, but not everyone was willing to accept her instructions so complacently.

“I-I will help, too!”

“We're capable of fighting, you know!”

“Would y’care for us to lend a hand?”

Mora, Log, and the dwarf Valbo offered their help one after another, only for Clara to shake her head. “We are looking at thirty fully armed soldiers... That said, this castle won’t fall easily if they lack siege weapons. I will try to negotiate with them first. After that, if we’re left with no choice but to fight...I will need to ask all of you for assistance.”

“...F-fair enough,” Log conceded.

“Good thing we got done mending them walls afore they came...” Valbo muttered.

With a nod, the boy and the dwarf set out for the main hall in the main tower. Just as Clara started to head toward one of the guard towers at the main gate with the dark elf in tow...

“...Clara!”

“Wh-what is it?”

Mora grasped Clara’s hand from behind so tightly it felt as if she were clinging for dear life. The young lady could feel the sorceress’s hand quivering in her own. As if trying to quell the trembling, she held Clara’s hand in both of hers as she pulled it toward her bosom.

“I-It will be all right! There must be some sort of mistake... E-even if they are bad people...I know Mister Geo will come back soon!”

“...You’re right. I’m sure he will pull through somehow,” Clara replied gently, her free hand resting reassuringly on Mora’s head.

“Madam! They will be here any minute now,” Sasara reported upon her return.

Clara stood gazing out from atop the guard tower. “They have abhorrent taste, don’t they?”

“Indeed.”

Although Castle Getaeus was located atop a mountain, the trees surrounding the castle had been cut down to create a narrow strip of flat land that would preclude any ambushes by the enemy. There was also a small, open area in front of the main gate. Soldiers clad in heavy armor bearing a variety of weapons poured into that small field.

Heavy armor. This was by no means merely durable plate mail. Sharp horns and blades protruded from their garish armor, primarily painted red. Even their helms and masks were not spared this

daemonic craftsmanship. Raised to appreciate the subtle, refined art favored among Relis nobility, Clara couldn't even begin to understand the soldiers' sense of taste. Standing at her side, Gilma expressed her agreement with a blank face.

"What noble house do you suppose they hail from?" Clara asked.

Once the two armored columns completed their march up the mountain trail, they stood at attention across the field; a crimson standard whipped in the air at the front of their ranks. The coat of arms depicted a brilliantly colored bird in a threatening pose, both its wings spread wide. As expected of the niece of a duke, Clara not only knew all the landed gentry in the Ryuse Alliance, but was also familiar with all of the knights and nobility in the Kingdom of Shrendal. Yet even she couldn't place that insignia.

"Some kind of mythical bird? ...I could swear I recognize those brightly colored wings and tail from somewhere... Ah!"

A scene flashed across Clara's mind from ten years ago. It was during the battle against the daemons that would later become known as the War of Loss. A conflict that had turned the entire Ryuse region into a battlefield. When Relis City's outer wall was besieged by daemon forces, the battle flag fluttering alongside the Calbanera Knights' and city guard's banners had belonged to...

"That is the warrior clan's crest!" Clara cried.

The warrior clan boasted a long history, dating back five hundred years to when it was said that the first daemon brood took place. Closer to legend than actual history, the tale held that a mighty warrior heralded as a "hero" had prevented the annihilation of humankind.

The actual truth regarding this "hero" was uncertain, but it was generally accepted that he'd vanished after the brood ended. The subordinates he'd left behind—the divine warriors—passed down their duty to fight daemons for all eternity across the generations. Their descendants referred to themselves as the "warrior clan."

While the truth behind their origin story was lost to antiquity, there was no denying the fact that they continued to fight daemons to this very day. Clara herself vividly remembered witnessing members of the warrior clan fight to protect Relis ten years ago.

Highly wary of daemonists, members of the warrior clan rarely revealed their heritage. As a result, it was nigh impossible to recognize

someone as part of the warrior clan when they weren't actively fighting daemons.

"...That is the extent of what I know about the warrior clan," Clara said, concluding her explanation for the two dark elves. She watched a warrior march toward the main gate with the standard-bearer in tow, the flag held high.

"I always assumed the warrior clan was just a fairy tale... But if that is who they are, shouldn't we get along with them?" Sasara sounded relieved.

"It's too soon to say," Gilma answered, dashing her hopes. Clara nodded in agreement.

Under their watchful gazes, the warrior and standard-bearer came about ten meters from the main gate before halting.

"...He's massive...!"

"Is that really a human? Not a daemon?"

It was only natural for Sasara and Gilma to sound surprised. The warrior was a giant of a man towering more than two meters tall. Unlike Gillion of the Calbanera Knights, he was not heavysset. Even covered by grotesque armor and a helmet inlaid with horns and blades, it was easy to imagine the muscular body beneath. A mask carved like a daemon hid his face, making it impossible to offer any evaluation on that account.

"I am Lade, a warchief of the warrior clan. I request an audience with Lord Geo Margilus." The massive warrior spoke with a deep, resonant voice.

"Lade? Correct me if I'm wrong, but Lade's the infamous Daemon Killer...isn't he?" Sasara asked Gilma.

"But we don't know for sure if he is indeed Lade the Daemon Killer," Gilma replied.

Ignoring the exchange between the Four Dark Elf Sisters, Clara brought herself to the edge of the guard tower. "I am his vicegerent, Clara Andell. Warrior of the warrior clan, take heed! Coming unannounced is an egregious breach of etiquette! Yet if you withdraw your men and send a messenger first, we will not hold it against you!" Clara spoke her pronouncement with staff in hand, sending a small ripple of murmurs through the ranks of warriors behind the one who identified himself as Lade.

While Clara criticized the warrior clan for their unacceptable behavior, she was also willing to compromise with them. The warriors endured condemnation on a regular basis, but they were

unaccustomed to compromise. Nevertheless, Warchief Lade was undeterred. "I apologize for the breach of etiquette, but we have our reasons."

"And what might they be?"

"Margilus is under suspicion of being a daemon or a daemonist. I must meet with him to confirm one way or the other," Lade explained, making Clara's perfectly shaped eyebrows rise in fury.

"You couldn't be more gravely mistaken! Lord Margilus is the hero who destroyed a daemon nest in these lands and defeated a daemonist in Relis City!" Clara's voice erupted like a volcano. Her rage simmered palpably as she scowled down at the warriors. It was such a piercing outcry that the two dark elves at her side flinched. But the target of Clara's tongue-lashing—Warchief Lade—didn't so much as move a muscle.

"I can determine whether or not he is a daemon or a daemonist simply by meeting him personally. If you claim he is innocent, I would appreciate your compliance."

"Insolent fool! Is that any way to make a request?! If you truly wish for us to comply, first order that offensive group behind you to fall back!" It was as if Clara was loosing fire arrows with her sharp tongue, but they bounced off Lade as easily as if he were a boulder.

A moment of silence passed. Clara turned toward Sasara, who was holding her breath in suspense, before gesturing to her with a slight flick of the wrist.

"...I understand, madam! I will bring the master back immediately!" Sasara promised.

Utilizing her extraordinary stealth and stamina, the dark-skinned young woman raced down the sheer cliff that surrounded Castle Getaeus. The same time as she fled the castle, there was also movement among the warriors waiting behind Lade. A warrior clad in unusual garments of his own appeared behind the one in the most flamboyantly decorated armor.

"Well?"

"A single dark elf is heading west. My partner is following her," he said.

"Excellent. I suspect she is headed straight for Margilus. Do not intervene if he decides to return. If he shows signs of fleeing, inform

me at once. No matter what, do not lose this trail.”

“Yes, sir!”

The eyes were abnormally large on the mask donned by the lightly equipped warrior bowing before the one in flashy armor. Masks such as this were unique to the warrior clan’s scouts known as the Eyes and Eyes. While it was difficult for normal humans simply to perceive dark elves, they could find one trying to conceal her movement and even track her.

Boasting a six-eyed insignia on either spaulder and quill feathers across his back, the warrior in ostentatious armor spoke his orders. “Fetch the warchief. We shall wait on standby until the next report.”

“As you command!”

“...Geo Margilus, the ‘magic user,’ huh? He means to form an anti-daemon alliance?” Crossing his arms over his chest, the warrior reflected on the information he’d gathered about Margilus along the way. Unlike the rumors in other cities, the word on the streets of his turf in Relis City would be worth taking into consideration. Eight out of ten people hailed him as a hero, while the remaining two condemned him a charlatan. Out of all the information he’d obtained, the main thing that stood out to him was how Geo had declared his intent to fight daemons and formed an alliance with Relis.

Boasting immense power and renown, Geo stood as a leader in the fight against daemons. He just might be the ally the warrior clan had long sought across their solitary battle of five hundred years... However, the oracle, who was like a mother in the hearts of all their clan, had prophesied that Geo Margilus was the Epicenter.

“This trial won’t be easy for me.” Would Geo prove to be the warrior clan’s enemy? Or would he be their hope? The weight of his responsibility as the man tasked with passing judgment pressed down so heavily, he couldn’t help but sigh.

This warrior’s name was Canberils. As the war master, he ranked higher than any other warrior present.

It was common to threaten naughty children in Sedia with phrases like “Daemons will gobble up bad girls and boys” or “The warrior clan will slay children who stay up all night.” Without any large-scale daemon attacks for the past decade, and only the rare daemonist sighting, the area surrounding Lake Ryuse was no exception.

No one knew the exact location of the warrior clan's stronghold, nor the precise size of the clan. However, it was common knowledge that not only was the prowess of each and every warrior on par with a legion of lesser men, but they also utilized unique artifacts to sniff out and hunt daemons and daemonists.

If that was all, they might have been revered as the guardians of humanity. Unfortunately, though the common folk hoped for a world without daemons, they viewed the warrior clan with fear and trepidation. They were the harbingers of misfortune. No sooner were they seen than they would publicly or privately expose a hidden daemonist and mercilessly strike down their prey. Some of the warrior clan realized this resentment was the price they paid for taking their duty—destroy all daemons, and everything associated with them—to the greatest extremes. Ultimately, they could not help but look down upon the world they were meant to protect.

“Any response from the Daemon's Sight?”

“None as of yet.”

After proposing a temporary halt in negotiations with the lady vice-regent, Lade rejoined the other warriors. Ignoring Canberils, he threw the question at one of the other men.

The target of his question was the only man in their ranks garbed in a red robe. A crystal ball the size of a child's fist rested in his hand. Serving as a mystic for the warrior clan, he was known by the name Cuisle.

Upon closer inspection, Lade could see a dark red shape sealed in the center of the crystal ball. Known as the “Daemon's Sight,” this secret conduit handed down within the warrior clan was capable of locating daemons and recognizing those influenced by them. The object sealed inside of the crystal was daemon blood.

“Warchief, the Daemon's Sight may be able to locate daemons and nests, but recognizing a daemonist without coming into direct contact is beyond even its power.”

“...Hmph,” Lade snorted, giving a brisk nod at Cuisle's dry explanation.

“The oracle's prophecy means we must proceed with the utmost care. If Margilus proves to be nothing more than a liar...or, against all odds, he truly is a magic user, we have no contention with him. However, if the Daemon's Sight should happen to react to him...”

Hidden beneath the imposing habiliments of his heavy armor, Canberils's Adam's apple jumped up in a gulp. "...Then it would mean he is the Epicenter for the next brood after all. We would have to defeat him before it's too late, even if it costs us all our lives."

Chapter 10

AFTER RECEIVING WORD from Sasara, I returned to Castle Getaeus in a huff of anxiety and anger.

“Clara! You’re all right. And everyone else is okay?”

Clara spoke confidently. “No one can touch this castle so long as I stand guard.”

It goes without saying that I didn’t just waltz right back in through the castle’s front gate. Since Sasara told me I was being followed, I invoked *Move Outer Plane* to arrive in a far less conspicuous fashion. It seemed negotiations with the warrior clan had stalled out for the time being, but the important thing was that no one was hurt.

“If I know you, you’re probably fretting about all the people here,” Clara said, looking over at me. “Put them out of your mind. You need to focus on deciding what response you’ll give.”

“You’re right...”

I went into the war room with a pale face, full of gratitude and respect for Clara. Even in a situation like this, she was as cool as spring water.

There were five people gathered there besides me: Sedam, Clara, Torrad, Djirk, and Reyha.

“They’re just camped out there, staring at us,” Sedam muttered. “What a pain.”

“Now that you mention it, it’s been ten years since the warriors have appeared in such a large group.” Clara shook her head. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Anyway, how do they intend to confirm whether Margilus is a daemonist?” Torrad wondered.

“I don’t know the details,” said Djirk, “but it sounds like they have some kind of special skill or tool they can use to tell.”

I listened to the adventurers converse, trying to pull myself together. Mora came in to serve me some sil tea—the poor girl looked on the verge of tears. I glugged it down quickly before I spoke. “If they’ve really got some kind of daemon-detector, then all I need to do is sit for their test. If their test even really exists.”

“If only it were that easy,” Sedam muttered. “Doesn’t this all just seem like a pretext? I bet they’ll seize on any reason they can to take

Margilus down.”

“If they go that far, then that actually makes things easier.” My words turned dark. “I’ll just ask them what they’d rather be turned into: pigs or statues.”

No one spoke a single word.

Everyone just stared at me. Words spoken in anger didn’t often leave my mouth, and to hear them now struck them dumb.

It was Sedam who spoke up first. “If *you* lose your temper, then things are going to get out of control, fast.” He held up his hands. “I know how you feel. But you need to bring it down a notch.”

“However.” Clara’s voice snapped like a whip the moment Sedam stopped talking. “Let us make one thing perfectly clear.” The single blue vein on her forehead stuck out visibly—it was plain at a glance that she was holding herself back. “I also have some advice. Even though they showed up here like this...I still think you need to try to build a friendly relationship with the warrior clan.”

More silence followed.

No one could disagree with her extremely level-headed advice. She was right. The warriors were skilled; they’d been fighting against the daemons for generations. Given my aims, they were allies I ought to do anything I could to acquire. If they had come to us with open arms from the very beginning, then I would have happily clasped hands in friendship.

We had the same goals. They possessed techniques for discovering the daemons and daemonists, and ample know-how about how to fight them. Truly, it would hard to imagine anyone better to join forces with.

“Well, hopefully we can clear up any misunderstandings. But we’ll see...”

“...I can feel the strength of their magic.” Clara glared through an embrasure out at the warriors below.

Magic? Only one person in their ranks looked like he might have any magical powers. Was she perhaps talking about magic-empowered warriors, who held skill with both spells and weapons?

“Admittedly, I’ve only seen warriors of the clan do battle from a distance, but I don’t remember them using any special powers,” said Sedam.

According to Sedam, it wasn't magic that set the warrior clan apart, but rather a unique method of fighting that wedded seemingly superhuman physical ability to specialized equipment.

"There's no denying that they're a fearsome group," I murmured, narrowing my gaze. Using *Sense of the Adept*, I observed their ranks.

The spell revealed that their giant of a leader was Warchief Lade, a twenty-eight-year-old man whose strength equaled a Level 21 *D&B* warrior. The most gaudily armored clan member was a forty-eight-year-old man, equivalent to a Level 13 warrior. Finally, the one wearing a the robe was forty, and equaled a Level 10 cleric.

The warriors of the clan were on a completely different level from all the adventurers and knights I had met up until now.

Lade could probably take down a daemon nest all by himself...

If the warrior Lade was indeed the rumored "Daemon Killer", then what he'd done in that village would make sense.

Even the rank-and-file warriors boasted levels ranging from 8 to 10. Considering that the highest rank in the Adventurers' Guild of Relis was Sedam's Level 9, and that the Calbanera Knights' highest was Leoria, at Level 10, it made sense that this group was capable of fighting daemons.

If they're this good, then we can't discount the possibility that they've infiltrated the castle already...

The gates wouldn't fall easily, but such a decorated group as this would have thought of that before rushing in. We had to think about what they had planned. Moment by moment, it was becoming clear to me just how much danger Mora, Clara, and all the rest were in. And as that realization dawned, my temper simmered even hotter.

Reyha stood just behind me, as always. She broke her usual silence to whisper a few words of advice. "...Forgive me, my lord, but anger slows judgment. I beg of you: Please try to still your heart."

"Mmm."

It was rare for her to oppose me in anything. I let out a deep sigh when I took in her apologetic expression. "Phew..."

She was right. I'd heard the same thing at a mental health presentation back at my old company. The speaker had told us: "Anger is the root of all troubles." A leader must be in control of his emotions.

Would I be this heated if I didn't have magic powers in the first place? No, I'm sure I would have just been shaking my head, hoping things ended peacefully. I was nothing without the strength I'd been

given. I couldn't let myself be consumed by a borrowed authority.

"You're right, Reyha. I think I've cooled off a little. Thank you."

"I am unworthy of your gratitude. If your temper still troubles you, please, direct it this way. Perhaps hitting me might make you feel better?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary..."

Protection. Mana Shield. Detect Enemy. Fly. Invisible Demon. Perfect Resistance.

Mind Wall. Emergency. And finally, Invincibility.

While charging today, I recited every spell I could think of that would be useful for protection. I was now regretting that I hadn't charged *Physical Boost*.

Lately, the more well-established TTRPG systems have established rules against stacking large numbers of beneficial spell effects simultaneously. Thankfully, classic *D&B* didn't have any such inconvenient restrictions.

All the same, I was teetering on the edge of exhaustion.
"Argh..."

Clara grasped my arm. "Just hold on a bit longer."

It had been less than two minutes of real time, but in my inner world I had already gone back and forth between the Gate of Magic and the spellbook archive nine times. Yet no sooner did I stumble than Clara was there to help hold me up.

"Sorry," I murmured to her. "Seems like you're always having to save me."

"That's not true..."

My next words were pitched loud enough for Sedam and Reyha to hear as well. "Time for me to set off. I'll be relying on your help later."

At first, they'd all insisted on coming along, but I convinced them that it would be better if I handled things alone. If anything went wrong, it would be easier for one person to get away.

Just like that, I left the castle.

I used *Fly* to soar over the castle wall and gently descend into the empty field beyond. The sight clearly caused confusion among the warriors, but no one shouted or hesitated.

“I am the wizard Geo Margilus, Lord of Castle Getaeus. Feckless warriors—if you would speak with me, then here I am!”

Even though I stood some twenty meters away from them, this was a group of experienced warriors clad in uniquely strange armor. The aura of intimidation they gave off was a completely different feeling from what I experienced facing daemons.

“I’ll speak for our clan, sorcerer... Or perhaps I should call you ‘wizard.’”

Apparently, the most gaudily equipped warrior was in charge. He broke ranks, stepping forward with the utmost dignity. When he reached me, he removed his mask. Behind him, giant warriors stood guard, forming a human wall.

“I am Warlord Canberils,” he declared.

Beneath his garish helmet he sported black hair neatly trimmed into a buzz cut, and his eyes narrowed into a sharp gaze. When I examined him under *Detect Enemy*, his wariness about me shone brightly.

“Well then, Canberils. Speak your piece.”

“...We suspect that you are a daemon or a daemonist. I have already told your lady castellan as much. In order to prove your innocence, we wish for you to submit to our examination.”

I considered him for a few moments. “We all know that the warrior clan is wholly devoted to fighting daemons wheresoever they might lurk. But that alone is not enough to explain your actions here. What reason could you have for thinking me a daemon?”

If their technique for detecting daemons and daemonists was genuine, then I definitely wanted to learn how to use it myself. But if they declared *me* a daemon, then perhaps it was worthless to begin with.

“Allow me to explain from the very beginning.” Canberils tucked his helmet beneath one arm. “We of the clan are descended from the divine legion that fought under the command of the Hero, some five hundred years ago...”

He was more forthcoming than I’d expected. In fact, I felt a strong sense of pride in the way he spoke. There were plenty of

tangents and flowery speech in his description, but to make a long story short:

The warrior clan had gained their knowledge and skills in fighting daemons from the “Hero” and the divine legion.

One of those pieces of knowledge was that a daemon brood originates from an Epicenter.

These Epicenters are thought to be some manner of passage existing deep within a daemon nest.

However, an oracle of the clan recently received a vision from a guardian deity. The prophecy stated:

“The Epicenter will appear at Mount Farsight.”

“The Epicenter is a human by the name of Margilus.”

“I see...”

How very kind and thorough of the oracle to mention me specifically by name, I thought sarcastically, while trying to process what it all meant.

But...an Epicenter?

“A passage deep existing within a daemon nest” must be that thing I saw that resembles my Gate of Magic. It’s no too hard to follow the train of logic: An Epicenter is a passage deep within the nest, which takes the form of a Gate of Magic, which links it directly to... me.

Could it be that I had been no different from the daemons and daemonists all along?

My current body was something created by the Watcher from whole cloth after hearing my request. At the very least, it definitely wasn’t that of a normal human.

More importantly, if the oracle’s vision was true, then it would mean that the next brood would happen because of me. I could feel the blood draining from my face. I hadn’t felt dread like that in a long time.

I couldn’t tell whether or not he was annoyed by my silence, but Canberils pushed for an answer. “I’ve told you everything I can. Will you submit to our examination?”

What he said seemed to make sense.

Why did the daemon nest appear next to me immediately after I arrived in Sedia? Why did something that resembled the Gate of Magic, which my friends and I had literally *made up*, seem to exist within that nest?

Things I'd previously written off as mere coincidence now seemed to make a sickening amount of sense.

I started to feel dizzy. I clutched my Staff of Wizardry tightly to keep from losing balance. A cold despair spread through my entire body.

That's how much of an impact Warlord Canberils's words had on me.

The Gate of Magic might exist within me, but it was a gateway that connected this world to the realm of chaos. If the other side of the gateway in fact connected to the world of the daemons...

If I really was the Epicenter, and thus the trigger for a massive brood of daemons...

Then I had to let the warrior clan eliminate me.

I was surprised at my sudden willingness to accept my own death.

In Japan, I had no wife, no children, and no family. But in this world, I had Mora, Clara, Ild, Sedam, Reyha, and all my friends at Castle Getaeus.

I realized then that I loved them. I loved this world.

If they were to be violated by the daemons because of me...

Just as I was playing out the potential tragedy in my head, the warlord's deep voice brought me back to reality. "I won't wait much longer for your answer."

I looked up to see Canberils glaring down at me. At first, I thought he was angry...but strangely, he peered at my face with fear in his eyes.

"Ah... Pardon me." I hurriedly wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my robe. I'm ashamed to say that tears were running down my face. The whole thing was embarrassing.

But that fact helped me think a bit more clearly. If my worst fears came to pass, then maybe it really would be better to let the warriors cut me down. The only thing I couldn't allow myself to do was nothing.

And so, finally, I found my voice. "As I see it...the issue is how credible the prophecies of your oracle are. How do I know you haven't made all this up?"

"An oracle also prophesied the second brood event one hundred and fifty years ago. The prophecies regarding the appearance of small daemon nests and powerful daemonists have been precise and

accurate many times. I have personally hunted down a daemonist in Shrendal in full realization of the oracle's visions."

"Mmn..."

Even so, there was no evidence. If this were a trial in the modern world, it would be thrown out.

However, aside from their allegations making perfect sense to me, the warrior clan had a history of effectiveness. Their deeds had become legends unto themselves.

"Tell me this," I said to Canberils. "How reliable is your examination? Can it really detect daemonists? Or even daemons, for that matter?"

"We use a tool called the Daemon's Sight for the examination. It is a special crystal with daemon blood sealed inside, which always reacts to those affected by daemons and daemonists."

So, that meant it would also react to those who were brainwashed or possessed by daemons, like Reyha once was.

It was perfect. If the warriors were my allies, they'd be a godsend.

"You mentioned that the appearance of a daemon nest was prophesied, but might the prophecy have instead referred to the daemon nest that appeared here two months ago? I've also heard that there have been daemonists in Relis City for over a decade now."

"Not all nests and cultists are detected by prophecy. If it were that easy, we would have already eradicated daemonkind long ago. But just the other day we received a prophecy that a group of daemons had appeared near Soler City, and our warchief annihilated all of them."

So, the man who had beaten us to the punch in taking down that daemon lair and the giant of a man standing behind Canberils were one and the same... He had to be Lade, the Daemon Killer. Between his oddly shaped armor and the massive sword on his back, he made Gillion feel small by comparison.

It was no use... I couldn't find any contradictions or holes in what the warlord was saying. *Maybe my only choice is to roll the dice and see what comes of their examination...but no, let's not be too hasty.*

There was always the possibility that Canberils was lying about everything. I needed to be one hundred percent certain I could trust him.

"I-Is everything you say true? You are asking me to take you wholly at your word."

“We speak the truth. Whether or not you believe it is your decision.”

If I could get a read on his innermost thoughts when he gave his reply, I'd know things for a fact. I concentrated on the ESP Medal I'd hidden in the sleeve of my robe, almost as if praying to it. But...

“Huh?!”

To my surprise, Canberils resisted the power of the ESP Medal. Even the chief of the Sorcerers' Guild hadn't been capable of that. Worse, it seemed he had noticed I was up to something.

He tilted his head suspiciously, then took something from his pocket.

I hesitated. “Uh...?”

The warlord held up a necklace adorned with a solitary jewel. It looked like a Japanese crescent-shaped stone. The stone was covered in cracks, and there was a red liquid dripping from it. There was nothing ordinary-looking about it. *No way!*

“This is a warding stone given to me by the oracle herself. What have you done to it?” Canberils spoke quietly. Dangerously. His tone was absolutely murderous. *Murderous?* So that was the piercing sensation I was feeling all over my body. *This is what ‘murderous’ truly means.*

Shiiing!

What happened in the next moments was a blur. I only managed to put things together with the pieces that I heard later.

First, Lade raced forward from his spot behind Canberils, drawing the massive sword on his back. He swung it straight down, aiming for my neck.

The two-meter-long slab of a blade looked like it had come right out of some manga or RPG, and he brandished it with such speed that I couldn't follow it with my eyes. The multiple defensive spells that I had cast on myself proved completely worthless.

“My Lord!!” It was Reyha who was the first to shield me, well ahead of my *Mana Shield* and *Invisible Demon*. She had probably used some kind of dark elf magic to lurk within my shadow. She tackled me from the side and we both fell to the ground.

Lade's massive sword swept above my body, which was now enveloped in the softness of Reyha's embrace. The sound of that sword swooshing by was tremendous. It was more like a blow to the eardrums than a mere rush of air.

“Cur!” Reyha quickly sprang up from where she’d draped herself protectively across my body. Something about her looked strangely distorted, probably thanks to the two slender daggers she held. It was hard for me to make out the contours of her limbs and body. With minimal movement, she approached Lade, who swung his mighty sword anew.

CLANG!

The air rang with the high-pitched keening of metal striking metal.



Lade's greatsword spun toward Reyha with the force of a tornado—only to stop cold, arrested by the blades she gripped in either hand.

“Rgh...!”

The weight and power were too much for her. Reyha's entire body trembled under the relentless pressure of Lade and his mighty sword. And because she was protecting me, she couldn't flee.

Should I let them capture me so Reyha could get away?

This was no joke! All of this was a complete misunderstanding!

I jumped up and shouted: “Stop!”

Neither of them even seemed to notice me.

I had no choice. If Lade wasn't going to back off, I needed to find a chance to use some sort of spell.

And then another voice called out: “Stop.”

Surprisingly, Canberils repeated what I had said. Lade glanced at Reyha, then at me, but dutifully returned his sword to his back.

“Reyha, you, too,” I said.

“Ahh...” Reyha squeezed a response out of her dry throat and stayed her blades. She stood in front of me, still trembling. Every inch of her remained on high alert.

“It's not a big deal,” Canberils shouted back in his deep voice. “It's just a misunderstanding!” His words were aimed behind me.

When I turned around, I found Sedam, Clara, and all my other fighting friends rushing in.

“Margilus.” Clara held me up by my arm. Sedam and Djirk hadn't drawn their weapons, but they were in a formation to protect me.

“I-It's okay,” I insisted. “He's right. This is all just one giant misunderstanding.”

Clara spoke anxiously. “But...”

I patted her arm and spoke to the warlord. “Canberils!”

The warlord nodded, undeterred. He gestured for me to continue.

“Excuse me. I apologize. You told me it was my decision, so I conducted my own kind of examination.”

“Is that so? Well, that's not a problem. And what did you discern?”

To think that this was his attitude after exuding such murderous intensity. I was completely outmatched. I made my decision then and there. “I will take your examination.”

Canberils gazed upon my face for some time before he spoke again. “I see. Excellent. Also...I heard something in Relis City. This is just hearsay, you understand; it’s not like I was there. But evidently you want to gather a company at this castle that will fight the daemons, and form an alliance among all the countries?”

I didn’t know what his intentions were, but if he had this much interest in us, maybe it would be easier to negotiate than I thought. Once the examination was done, anyway.

“That’s not quite right,” I told him. “I am not gathering allies in order to fight the daemons.”

“Then why?” he pressed.

“I will fight alongside my allies in order to protect people *from* the daemons.”

“Hmm...”

Canberils’s stern eyes showed a hint of surprise. So that was the difference between the warriors and me. My company was not fighting solely to slay the daemons. To us, that was just a means to an end: the safety and wellbeing of the people of Sedia.

“The warrior clan will now set forth its judgment. All determinations will be made by Cuisle, our presiding mystic. The executor is Warchief Lade. I, Warlord Canberils, will serve as witness.”

We stood in the empty field in front of the castle gate.

A man in a red robe emerged from the group of warriors who were standing by and stopped just before me. Warlord Canberils stood to his left and Warchief Lade stood to his right.

My friends watched, a mixture of nervousness and worry on their faces.

Cuisle said, “Margilus. Hold out your right palm.”

I didn’t speak. I silently followed the instructions of the expressionless mystic and stuck out one hand. He placed something that looked like a crystal ball in my palm.

At the core of the hard, warm, transparent sphere floated a red-black mass. *So, this is the Daemon’s Sight—and that must be daemon*

blood.

There was no response.

I realized I'd forgotten to ask what sort of reaction the daemon blood might have. Would it turn black or something?

Canberils swallowed, and Lade once again clutched the handle of his greatsword.

Unable to take the silence anymore, I spoke to the mystic, who was staring intently at the Daemon's Sight. "So, what does it mean?"

"It's..."

At that moment—

He jerked his thumb toward the daemon blood.

The reaction was small at first. But it quickly grew bigger. A crystal stone was spinning around inside the ball like a pinwheel.

The lukewarm heat I'd felt before was replaced by a coolness above my palm. The surface of the crystal beaded with a thin layer of condensation.

Canberils seemed flustered. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Cuisle answered, shrill. "I've never seen such a response before!" He turned to me. "Margilus, do you feel anything?"

"Uhh..."

Cuisle narrowed his eyes, trying to divine the truth. Having no idea what was going on, I concentrated on the sensation in my palm and the rampant daemon blood.

"I feel...anxiety...and maybe fright? It's like this blood feels hate and fear toward me."

All I really had to go on was my gut feeling and intuition, but when I spoke honestly about what I was feeling, Cuisle nodded softly. He took the Daemon's Sight from my hand and put it away in his pocket.

Lade interrogated Cuisle, frustrated. "So what does that mean? Is he a daemonist or not?"

Cuisle looked stunned. He turned his head toward Canberils. "If he were influenced by the daemons in any way, the daemon blood would sense he was an ally and spread out thinly, trying to assimilate with him...and, moreover, it would turn red. But I've never seen this sort of reaction before. I honestly just...don't know."

I thought about what Cuisle said for some time. What did it mean? He still couldn't tell whether or not I was a daemon?

Canberils came to a decision. “If we’re not certain, then we can’t kill him.”

“Warlord!” Lade stepped forward. “Do you intend to defy our priestess’s orders?”

“Last I checked, we don’t take our commands from her. That’s the Council of Elders’ job. Also, if you ask me, the oracle was acting a little strange.”

For some reason, Lade and Canberils began arguing right in front of me.

Lade held that they should cut me down immediately, according to the oracle’s prophecy. Canberils, on the other hand, maintained that they should keep an eye on things until they could conclusively prove that I was a daemon.

Honestly, I didn’t even know what to think. Was I a daemon or not? Without a definitive answer, it was hard to feel pleased.

Canberils continued to debate with his officers for some time, before finally looking over to me. “Sorry to keep you waiting. The results of your trial are as follows: Due to insufficient evidence, judgment will be deferred. The examination must continue elsewhere.”

“...Continue? Where?”

“We will return to our castrum—I suppose you would call it our headquarters—and report on the situation. We will confer with the Council of Elders and the oracle for guidance and then return here.”

I exhaled wearily. “It sounds like quite a long process... Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

They had decided to continue the matter solely because of mysterious reaction of the Daemon’s Sight, but I knew about a piece of suspicious evidence they lacked: the Gate of Magic.

If I felt certain they were going to kill me, I might have mentioned it, but for now I decided to keep it to myself. After getting a reprieve, I didn’t want to inadvertently make them change their minds and execute me on the spot.

“Of course, there is a possibility that you will slip and show your true nature.” Canberils gestured toward his men. “Therefore, Warchief Lade and ten warriors are hereby assigned to stand watch at this castle.”

“To watch me, you mean?” I clarified.

“That’s right. Understand that if something untoward does occur,

Lade will take off your head immediately.”

“I would expect nothing less.”

Of course, I had no intention of being taken without a fight...but me succumbing to some kind of daemonic taint also wasn't an impossible scenario. In that sense, it might be better to have someone like Lade around.

“Also, in the event you come across some other daemon or daemonist... Please use your judgment and command our warriors to help protect the people.”

Lade seemed taken aback. “Hey!”

I was surprised, too. For the first time in a while, my persona as the great magic user evaporated entirely. “A-are you entirely certain about that...?”

The edges of Canberils's mouth quirked up into the ghost of a smile as he put his absolutely hideous helmet back on. “This is just me speaking personally, but I find it hard to believe that someone as whiny and soft-hearted as you could be connected to the daemons. Consider the use of my men a gift, to make up for any inconvenience our visit caused.”

Chapter 11

WITH THEIR BANNER snapping proudly in the wind, the warriors withdrew from the castle, Warlord Canberils leading the way.

After watching them disappear into the woodland, I returned to the castle. The ten warriors and my new nursemaid Lade followed close behind.

My first step was to try and reassure everyone—they looked completely dumbfounded by what had just happened. Next, I made a point of apologizing to the dwarves. Finally, we gave the warriors a spot in the courtyard to set up camp.

Once everything seemed to be somewhat in order, I gathered my friends in my quarters. “I’m truly sorry to have put you through so much worry. But please listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you.”

I looked around at the faces of Clara, Sedam, and Reyha. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t be reuniting with Ild anytime soon. Their expressions all showed concern, and I think they were more worried about me than themselves.

I had to tell them about the deal I’d made with the warrior clan. I also had to tell them about what I’d kept from the warriors: the connection between my Gate of Magic and the Epicenters. I took a few minutes and told them everything.

“...And so,” I concluded, “They’re returning to their ‘castrum’ to ask for the judgment of their oracle and Council of Elders.”

I still didn’t really get why the warriors used such an exotic term for their base. Canberils said that it would take a month or two just to make the round trip there and back, so we had some time. Naturally, he didn’t give so much as a hint as to where their base was actually located.

“Epicenters... Prophecies... Have to admit, it’s pretty worrying,” said Sedam.

“What completely intolerable people,” Clara spat out.

Reyha was as silent as ever. When I looked over for her input, she spoke with perfect calm. “I can eliminate them anytime you wish. You need but give the order.”

Thanks, but that’s not the kind of support I was looking for...

“I’m sorry,” I told them. “I should have mentioned the connection between the Gate of Magic and the daemon nest sooner.

According to the warriors, there's a chance I could be the trigger for the next brood event... So..."

What I wanted to say was, "If anyone wants to leave, I understand," but I choked those words back. I'm the worst kind of coward—I knew they wouldn't leave even if I told them to. And I also knew that I would take full advantage of their goodwill.

If I presented them with a clear-cut choice to stay or leave, then I was just making excuses for myself in advance. If they ever got hurt down the line, then all I had to do was quietly console myself with the thought, *It was their choice to stay*. I'd almost tried to manipulate them without even thinking about it.

The daemon threat wasn't just a problem for Sedia. I had made it my own personal business. And that meant that no matter what happened, I was responsible for the consequences.

In the end, I had no choice but to embrace my role as the great magic user.

"I can't do this alone," I told them. "I need each and every one of you to help solve this problem. I want to thank you for standing by me."

"Yeah, yeah, we got it." Sedam gave a quick wink.

"Don't mention it," Clara said.

"The heart of your Si remains steadfast with her Olry." Reyha put a hand to her chest and bowed deeply.

They answered like my request was no big deal. That was one of the reasons I loved them all so much.

I think I feel tears coming on... I did my best to hold them back. Funny how the tear ducts are the first thing to go when you get older...

"The more I think about it, the more something feels fishy about their story."

We'd gathered once again to discuss the issue, and Sedam jumped right into it.

"Really?" I cocked my head to the side. "It makes sense to me..." After going over everything I'd discussed with Canberils, I couldn't find any inconsistencies in his testimony.

"You're not usually this careless," said Sedam. "Do you really believe in prophecies? They have soldiers good enough to shadow

dark elves. If they were to use that power to gather information, they could ferret out daemons and daemonists all on their own.”

“Call it a prophecy, or the results of an investigation, but that’s all semantics,” I said. “The results are the same either way.”

“You seem surprised that they’d even heard your name, but you’ve become quite well-known around the Ryuse Alliance over the past couple of months. There’s nothing strange about the warriors knowing who you are.”

“Sedam is correct,” said Reyha.

Hmph. So it could have been a hot reading. Back on Earth, mystics and psychics have been known to do all kinds of research on their customer in advance, and then make a big show of “discovering” those things during a reading. And Reyha, the best intelligencer among us, agreed with Sedam’s assessment.

I never thought I'd run into a bunch of occult skeptics in a literal fantasy world, but hey, if the shoe fits...

“Their predictions regarding a new brood event are also suspect, given the appearance of the daemons the other day,” said Clara. “If they knew about the lair in advance, why not prevent the daemons’ attack?”

“Hmmm...”

Clara had a point. Why hadn’t I thought of that when I was talking to Canberils?

“Well, one thing we know for sure is that the warriors are experts in daemons. It’s natural to want to trust them,” I said.

“Yes, and if we decide to doubt the Daemon’s Sight and all their other magical tools, we might be here all day,” said Clara. “But at the very least, we can agree that we don’t need to accept everything they said at face value.”

I understood. At this point, we needed to determine the true intentions of the warrior clan.

If my name really was part of their oracle’s prophecy, then I needed to uncover the truth. And even if it was a ruse meant to trick me, then I wanted to know the reason why.

When I brought this up, Sedam’s and Clara’s faces twisted.

“Investigating the warrior clan is a pretty tall order,” said Sedam.

“They don’t associate with outsiders at all.”

It was true. By then, I had investigated daemons many times,

and I was only able to get the vaguest details about the warrior clan. Of course, we had Lade, warrior among warriors, sitting right there in our stronghold, but it was unlikely he would volunteer much information.

For the time being, we decided to ask the Adventurers' Guild and the Sorcerers' Guild to gather what information they could about the Epicenter and the warriors. But it seemed like we shouldn't expect miracles from them.

All the talk about the Epicenter gave me a headache. *All I can do for now is take it one step at a time.*

Clara left for Relis immediately. She was our emissary to the guilds, and would see about getting them to collect information for us.

Actually, aren't we going to have a lot of...problems...without Clara around?

Clara was awfully important, in that we could leave command of the castle to her whenever Ild and I weren't on hand. But on further reflection, it wasn't as if she was handling the day-to-day minutiae of castle business.

Realistically, Mora was much more important than Clara when it came to castle management. She handled the cleaning, cooking, laundry, and all sorts of daily necessities in Castle Getaeus. She made sure that every little thing we required for life in the castle was taken care of.

I really thought it would be too much for a fourteen-year-old girl to handle, but she always had a smile on her face when she was mopping, chopping, keeping the books, or giving the servants orders. In fact, it was all thanks to her that we had been living so comfortably.

I was thinking about how she and Ild put everyone at my old company to shame as I walked out into the courtyard.

A number of ropes stretched between the main tower and the residential building, and on them hung freshly washed sheets and tablecloths. From my room up in the main tower, I'd heard Mora and the others speaking below, but by the time I got down there, it seemed

they were already finished.

I looked around and saw Mora sitting on a bench by the wall of the residential building.

She was sleeping.

The young girl dozed against the wall, adorably.

There was no doubt she was overworked. I couldn't bring myself to wake her, and instead sat down next to her as quietly as possible.

She was nominally the chief maid, but the only other maids were the Four Dark Elf Sisters, who were mainly charged with handling security both inside and outside the castle. In the end, the only staff performing castle duties were the married servants Sam and Anna, along with the young carpenter, Zek.

That would be plenty if it was only me they had to care for, but they also had to look after the former Mage Knights and the dwarves. I was ashamed by my lack of foresight.

Thankfully, Ild was currently out looking for new servants as well as soldiers, so the problem would be solved soon enough.

From my seat on the bench, I could see the warriors setting up their camp.

Despite its long wall, Castle Getaeus didn't have many interior buildings. What it did have was ample space in the courtyard. It seemed the warriors had blocked off about a fifth of the yard as their own territory.

They had naturally removed their uniquely-shaped outer armor along with its animal horns and blades. Without all the gear in the way, I noticed unusual tattoos decorating their skin.

I took a moment to appreciate the irony: They'd come here to kill me, and now I was acting as their host. *I should probably prepare some defensive magic just in case.*

Even though this was the situation I was facing—no, precisely *because* the situation was like this—I needed to ask Mora to take on yet another role.

"Though, I'm already really sorry about it," I muttered as my eyes trailed Warchief Lade. He stood head and shoulders above the rest of his men.

"Hmm... Oh, Mister Geo! Do you have, um, a task for me?"

It seemed Mora had heard me muttering. She stretched a little and then sat up straight.

"Yeah. I'm really sorry, but I want you to serve the warriors the

same meals as the rest of us. I also want you to supply them with things like water, changes of clothes, and other daily necessities.”

“Right, got it! I’ll add them to the dinner rounds starting tonight.”

They were stationed here to monitor me. Even with their orders from Canberils, I didn’t think they would be quick to show me respect or trust. On the contrary, they had already gotten off on the wrong foot with Clara and the others.

I had to improve the situation. Preparing for the worst-case scenario was one thing, but if we had any hope of fighting alongside the warrior clan in the future, then we definitely needed to start developing a cooperative relationship now.

I was fully expecting to explain my reasoning in detail to get Mora on board, but she nodded without hesitation. Just like that, she’d lifted a heavy weight from my shoulders. I inadvertently turned my eyes away.

“I know it’s a lot of work, but I need you to hold out a little longer. I’ll hire more servants as soon as I can.”

“It doesn’t feel like a lot of work at all,” said Mora. “You’ve got it way tougher, dealing with the state of the world and the daemons and all.”

“Oh... Well, thank you.”

She was giving everything she had to be of assistance to me. I had no choice but to rely on her, but someday I would have to make sure that she was truly happy.

...It wasn’t something I could admit to Ild, but I thought that this must be what it felt like to be the father of a daughter I adored.

“You will suffer no inconveniences as long as you are staying in the castle,” I declared to a very shirtless Lade.

“Hmm...”

Not that it was relevant, but up close, I noticed his keen eyes and the very distinguished sweep of his nose. Lade was a far more handsome man than I’d realized—though it wasn’t as if I cared about such things.

Lade’s guard was definitely up where I was concerned. At my declaration, he looked over to his men for support. It was obvious

there was still a deep gulf between us.

“The castle cuisine is excellent. You won’t be disappointed.” I gave Lade a pat on his massive log of an arm and left their camp.

The day after the warriors arrived, Mora and the Castle Getaeus staff began their work early.

Just like every other day, the young girl stole from her bed before dawn. After washing her face and dressing quickly, her first stop was the heater. It was the responsibility of the chief maid to light the fire in the gas oven, which could easily be called the heart of the castle.

Anna woke up at the same time, and together with the former Mage Knight cadets, they all worked to finish preparations by dawn.

Mora then prepared a tub and towel along with freshly boiled water and headed for the main tower.

The lord of the castle, Geo, was rarely awake this early. Waking him and helping him dress was one of the only tasks that Mora never assigned to anyone else. Today’s breakfast was leftover curry from the night before with added meat and vegetables, plus a side of bread.

On days when the weather permitted, the servants and soldiers ate at benches and tables set up in the courtyard. The lord of the castle and his loyal adventurers used a room in the main tower as their personal dining hall.

Mora and the dark elves would take their meal after serving the lord and finishing all the subsequent cleanup. At first, Geo wasn’t used to being waited on, but they were steadfast, and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

After breakfast, it was time for the washing, cleaning, and maintenance.

Laundry was mainly the job of the youngsters: Log, Tel, and Daya. The sheets, tablecloths, towels, and undergarments collected from throughout the castle were tossed into a massive washing basin, where they were soaked in water and a detergent made from lye. After soaking, they were stamped clean or beaten with a rod.

Even though it was the dry season, the well water was cold enough to turn the boys’ hands bright red.

The usually hot-blooded and bossy Log was reduced to petulant grumbling. “Are we going to have to keep on washing laundry

forever?"

"Seems like it," said Daya. She held a long-burning grudge against daemons, and nodded grimly in agreement.

Tel, on the other hand, half-heartedly disagreed. "Well, it's not ideal, but you know, we don't really have it so bad around here..."

Lately, variations on this scene had played out over and over.

Log swung his beating rod against a sheet, harder and harder. "The whole reason we quit our training and became students of Margilus was to learn how to make golems!"

Daya agreed. "And we've been doing nothing but chores for two weeks now..."

"What can we do about it?" Tel sighed. "Margilus seems to be really busy..."

"Exactly!" Mora appeared right behind Log. "Mister Geo is busy!"

"Hey," Log grumbled. "Quit it."

Log's rod sank to the ground as Mora aggressively stroked his black hair. "You've only just arrived at the castle! What did you expect?"

"Uhh..." Log's face reddened at the reprimand. He had no response in the face of Mora's motherly scolding. In fact, he and his fellow cadets were only twelve years old, which made them two whole years younger than Mora.

"Don't worry," Mora said. "Geo cares about us a lot. Just a little while ago he was saying he was so sorry that he didn't have time to teach you. He hasn't forgotten."

"R-really?"

"Yeah," said Tel. "Like I said. This is way better than that crummy training school!"

"So get to work! Once the laundry is dry, you can take a break until lunch!"

Lunch was freshly baked bread with bean stew, sausage, and raisins.

Anna—the cook—deftly spread a healthy layer of butter over the bread, while Mora dished the stew into bowls. Several of the Dark Elf Sisters returned from their lookout posts to help the boys with serving.

"Hello, Miss Mora! Why are there so many servings today?" Argha clearly didn't know what was going on.

“There were just as many at yesterday’s dinner,” said Mora.

As of the day prior, meals were being provided for all the warriors stationed at the castle. It was a personal request of the castle lord.

“What?! You’re going to serve *them*?” To Argha, the warriors were enemies that had called her lord a daemon. She puffed out her cheeks in frustration.

“That’s right,” said Mora. “The truth is that if we don’t get along with the warriors—with everyone in the world—we won’t be able to defeat the daemons.”

“Uh... I understand, Miss Mora.”

Mora smiled and kept on arranging bread and sausage on a platter. The dark elves knew well enough what their Olry’s goals were. Reluctantly, Argha started to pitch in.

Normally, the warrior clan did not use any well-traveled roads or stay at inns.

This was all in the name of furthering their hunts. Daemons tended to hang around in the wilds, and daemonists maintained their own information network across human society. Thus, their skills in cooking and camping were the equal of those they showed in battle, and they valued them just as highly.

The tents set up in a corner of the courtyard were made with light and durable wooden frames, covered by leather coated with a special resin. They were sturdy, and boasted both excellent heat retention and spacious interiors.

Of course, by “spacious,” I mean spacious for a typical warrior.

Standing taller than two meters, their massive warchief Lade had to bend over to come out of his tent.

He wore only leather pants and boots, foregoing a shirt entirely. His muscular physique had only a modest amount of fat—it reminded me of MMA fighters back home. His tanned skin was covered in strange tattoos.

“It’s strange,” he said. He glanced at the large courtyard and high, strong walls of Castle Getaeus.

The boys and girls were drying sheets and clothes in the warm sun of the courtyard. His massive body was surrounded by the bright

and cheerful voices of children.

By the castle gate, the three young recruits were returning from their training. They were being lectured by a middle-aged warrior as they made their way to the well, and when they got there, they poured water over their heads, cheering. There was none of the stereotypical soldier's behavior...no yelling or swearing, no nervousness or spite... Most of all, there was no anger.

Fighting was simply a means to destroy the daemons, not a way of life. This scene was a far cry from the training that Lade knew. Training fueled by burning anger, which left its victims vomiting blood and bile.

To think that the lord of the castle had declared that he would fight the daemons. There wasn't any sign of true fighting ability anywhere in this castle.

All around Lade stood stone-faced warriors hard at work cleaning their weapons. It was a familiar scene, but somehow, they were the ones who seemed out of place.

"Warchief, our inspection is complete."

"Ah..."

Lade nodded slightly to the senior warrior who came to report to him. Even though his target was right in front of him, he had no way to determine whether it was appropriate to take him out. Never before had an examination left him in such an uncertain position.

"Should we do some training, sir? Or prepare food?"

"There's no need for any of that. We need to treat this the same as a combat posting. Margilus could show his true identity at any time."

"Oh!"

Be ready to fight at a moment's notice. That was his warrior's instinct.

But then...

"Hello!"

He heard the voice of a cheerful young girl.

A girl dressed as a maid, two Dark Elf Sisters, and an older couple approached them, hauling a wagon full of freshly baked bread and soup.

“Oh,” one of the warriors murmured, perking up.

“Smells good,” said another.

Lade could hear his men lining up and talking among themselves. These were all men who, if so ordered, were supposed to be able to stand at attention for an entire day without wavering.

“Today’s bread is made with heaps of flour and is as sweet and delicious as you please. The stew is also chock-full of spices.” The girl gave a series of instructions and joined her staff in handing out the bread and stew. Though it did look a bit forced, even the dark elves and servants dished out the food with smiles.

It wasn’t particularly suspicious, since the lord of the castle had instructed they be provided food as of yesterday’s dinner.

“Here you are, Lade. Is everyone waiting for you to eat before they start?”

“Oh... Yeah.”

The girl’s chestnut-colored hair fell to one side as she tilted her head and held out some bread for Lade. Once the rich aroma of flour and butter reached his nose, Lade couldn’t resist taking a piece.

Naturally, the warrior clan didn’t carry baking ovens out into the field. The only chance they had to eat freshly baked bread was at the castrum, or when they were posing as common people in society. But here he was in the middle of an assignment, being asked to take the time to enjoy a proper meal.

There was silence.

He took a bite without making eye contact with the girl. The rich texture of the butter perfectly complemented the softness of the bread.

Once they saw their warchief take his silent bite, the rest of the warriors also dug in to their own portions.

“It’s good,” one of them said.

“I bet there’s no way you could cook up something this fancy in the field,” said another, sampling soup and sausage.

“Hey, can I get another piece?”

There was even honey to drizzle on the bread. It wasn’t long before half the warriors were asking for seconds.

“It’s like a dream,” said a younger warrior quietly.

Lade knew what he meant. For a warrior, having a woman brave enough to dote on you really was like a dream.

Their job was to hunt down the daemonists who sank into the darkness of human society.

Apparently, for normal people, the first sign that their otherwise friendly neighbor might actually be a daemonist was waking up one morning to find a dead body. Even if they understood the connection, it was hard for people to understand that when the warrior clan showed up, it meant that daemons had appeared.

The powerful folk of the world had never outlawed or restricted their clan, and the guards and lords even allowed them a voice in the halls of power. But that did nothing to stem the anger and fear that people felt when they saw the warriors coming.

Lade still remembered the words of the one who'd trained him: "There is no place where a warrior is wanted, only places where a warrior is needed."

He spoke to Mora as she bustled past him. "Are you...okay?"

She paused. "Excuse me?"

"Don't you fear us?"

I could tell in a single day how taken this girl and the dark elves were with the lord of the castle. I was certain their coming to us was just them following his orders, something they resented. But now... Lade's expression made it clear that he thought Mora should be afraid.

But her answer came quick and firm. "Nope! I sure don't!"

"Hmm..."

It was a different tone than the simple, cheerful voice she had used just moments before. There was determination in it now. This was the voice of someone who was ready to put everything she had on the line to achieve her goals.

"My mother was killed by a daemon," Mora told Lade. "That's why I'll do anything to help Mister Geo—I mean, Lord Margilus."

The girl's normally dignified expression faltered into a blush when she realized the warriors and servants were all staring at her.

"Oh, ha ha! Sorry. I probably shouldn't be talking about something so dreary. But I've heard that you warriors are all fighting against the daemons. And, well, if you're going to be stuck here in our castle anyway, I want you to feel comfortable..."

There was silence.

Lade may have been the strongest warrior of their company, but all he could do was stand in silence after hearing this young girl's words—a girl who didn't even reach up to his chest.

Chapter 12

THINGS WITH THE WARRIORS were settling down, and our policy toward them was going over well. Now it was time to negotiate with the dwarves.

As things stood, the Axeholm dwarves were able to trade with Castle Getaeus, but they were unable to complete the road that linked us directly together. It seemed they had put the anti-daemon alliance on hold.

Fortunately, we had Valbo on hand dealing with the repairs to the castle walls. Valbo was the head of a prominent house of architects, House Dauron. They had command over all building and construction projects in Axeholm.

My goal was to earn his trust.

The first words out of Valbo's mouth were, "What a disaster! Singled out by the warrior clan!"

He spoke with sympathy. While it surely would have been different if I had been deemed a daemon, he seemed nonchalant about the fact that I had been under suspicion.

"I'm sorry I caused so many problems for all of you," I said to Valbo. "At the very least, let me compensate you by adding a little bit extra to your fee."

"Well!" Valbo laughed. "It'd be fine and noble of me to say 'don't worry about it,' but alas, I'm not so noble as all that. If you're handing out free money, I'd be a fool to refuse."

He seemed to be in a good mood.

Our initial contract covered the repairs to the castle wall, and the work had already been completed. Once he received the compensation I offered for his inconvenience, he took a quick step back, like he intended to head home right away.

I had other ideas. "Let's cut right to business. I want to talk about the road."

"Hmm? Now that you mention it, I do remember you saying something about a road before. Weren't you going to rustle up a pack of giants to help with the construction?"

There was no sense of condescension in Valbo's expressive, bearded face. But he did seem to think that I'd been joking before. *I suppose this kind of reaction is to be expected.*

“Yeah. Tasks like clearing timber would certainly go a lot faster if we had the giants helping out. They can also aid with moving piles of earth. Eventually, I plan to have them take all the gathered lumber to Axeholm.”

“Lumber? We’d be mighty grateful...”

We’d reached the point where I needed to show him the real thing if the project was to move forward. Valbo frowned slightly as I took him out the castle gates to the empty field beyond. The other dwarves followed behind us.

I turned away from Valbo and the other dwarves, took a step forward and started to cast my spell.

“Open, Gate of Magic.”

Within my inner world, my imagined self stared intently at the black door that appeared before my eyes. The Gate of Magic.

“There it is...”

According to the warrior clan, this magic gate was the Epicenter that summoned daemons into the world. Before I’d learned that, this gate had been the cornerstone of my power as Geo Margilus, reliable and firm. Now it felt like a dark omen.

No...perhaps the way things turn out will be up to me. I won’t let this be the Epicenter for a daemon host. This Gate of Magic is mine, and mine alone.

I needed to believe it. For Reyha, who bravely faced Lade’s greatsword. For all of my friends who rushed to my side to protect me. For Mora, who showed Lade’s fearsome warriors her hospitality. I had to make this true, for all of them.

Nevertheless, I went down the familiar spiral staircase more timidly than usual, soon arriving at the seventh-level spellbook archive. When the magical power bound in book form was released, my physical self finished casting the spell.

“As a consequence of this spell, I will create three forest giants in this space under my command for a duration of one hour. *Create Monster.*”

“Hmm? Huh?” The dwarves stared.

The air in front of us started to ripple, distorting light and space. On the other side of the distortions, giant shadows formed. The shadows wavered and gradually coalesced into beings of shape and color, almost human in their appearance.

“Whoa,” one dwarf shouted. “Whoa!”

“G-g-giants?!”

By the time those humanoid forms had completely materialized, the dwarves stared with eyes so wide that they looked like they might fall out of their sockets.

The giants were about seven meters tall, roughly the same height as a two-story home in Japan. They had strong bodies, leather clothes and armor, and firm, bearded jawlines. The spark of intellect glimmered in their eyes.

When the three forest giants stood shoulder to shoulder, the field looked very small indeed.

Valbo tugged at the hem of my robe, punctuating the astonishment of all the dwarves. “M-Master Margilus! What have you done?!”

“What manner of magic is this?” demanded another. “Some sort of conjury?”

“I cannae tell if I drank too much or drank too little...”

I could tell the dwarves were shaken. Some dropped to the ground, others went grabbing for their pickaxes, and a few started swigging alcohol from their flasks right then and there.

But... This was different, wasn't it? I wasn't threatening them, like when I'd dropped the meteor before the Calbanera Knights, or when I'd turned Shaup into a pig at the Adventurers' Guild.

“They are forest giants,” I said, trying to come off both friendly and dignified. “They are magical beings that I created, and they will listen to whatever orders I give. They can also follow your instructions.”

The dwarves could hardly ask for better tools than these.

“Wh-what are you... Are you saying we should use these things for construction?!”

“Mm-hmm. If it would help, I can make six more right now. If you can wait until tomorrow, I can prepare as many as twenty-seven.”

The Rank 7 spell *Create Monster* was used just as its name implied. However, there were certain conditions limiting what monsters could be created. It wasn't possible to make undead or other magical beings—only species that possessed no special powers.

The maximum number of monsters that could be created was limited by the level of the wizard. I was currently Level 36, so I could make, for example, thirty-six Level 1 monsters or four Level 9 monsters. Forest giants were Level 12. Convenient, since I could cast

one spell and make three giants without any levels going to waste.

“As a consequence of this spell, I will extend the effective time of the monsters. *Infinity!*”

Next, it was time for the Rank 8 spell *Infinity* to shine.

Create Monster was an extremely convenient spell, but it only lasted for one hour. Luckily, *Infinity* allowed for that time to be extended. It lived up to its name by making low-level spells permanent, but when it came to high-level spells, it only dramatically extended their duration.

This would allow the three giants I created to last for an entire day.

The expressions on the forest giants' faces said that they already knew their mission. They were carrying laborers' equipment, not their usual weapons. Given their size, the equipment looked like it was capable of breaking down Castle Getaeus's walls. When casting the spell, a wizard is able to make a few modifications like this, so it really was a convenient thing to have in my arsenal.

“I made sure they had pickaxes and shovels for clear-cutting the woods and leveling the earth. But if you need anything else, please let me know. I can change their tools tomorrow. ...What's the matter?”

“Ohhh... Wh-whoaaa!”

Valbo was watching the three giants kneel respectfully before us. Then the shock in his voice gradually changed to laughter.

“Bwa ha ha! Ga ha ha! You're absolutely evil, is what you are! You've called up *giants* to help us build a *road*, of all things! Evil! Wicked! Utterly *depraved*, I say!” Valbo looked up to me, his large eyes agleam with ambition. “Coming from a long line of architects, I can safely say that neither I nor my ancestors could dare to waste such massive tools on simple, everyday construction!”

Valbo lifted his fist, as if to scold the dwarves who were still cowering around him.

“We'll do it like none other! The best construction! The fastest speed! The highest quality! And the cheapest price! We'll make a bloody gorgeous highway all the way from Axeholm right to your castle gates. We'll even connect the damned thing to the Lawful Way!” He turned and shouted a rallying cry to his fellow dwarves: “Dauron!”

The answer came fast and fierce. “Dauron! Dauron! Dauron!”

“Yeaaaah!”

“Count us in, boss!”

This was exactly what I'd hoped for. I'd set their architectural hearts on fire.

Just like that, the architects of House Dauron became an important partner of Castle Getaeus.

The dwarves of House Dauron started working feverishly the very next day. One was in charge of surveying the land from Castle Getaeus to Axeholm. Another set about calculating the necessary materials and tools, while still another started planning how to transport those materials to the worksite. Naturally, they had someone busy drawing up plans and blueprints as well.

The dwarves were far more advanced than Sedia's humans in civil engineering and metallurgy. They had the perfect mixture of passion and patience to endure the endless process of laying out a foundation.

They gave me a list of tools they needed me to prepare, which included a crane and an elevator, both of which required pulleys and gears.

Dwarves are awesome.

From their perspective, of course, it was "magic is awesome." Seeing the strength of the forest giants working in conjunction with *Create Earth*, the dwarves were ecstatic. After pricing in the unique advantages offered by my spells, they estimated the highway would cost 600,000 gold coins and would take six months to finish. After three months, it would be passable enough to use. Using purely conventional techniques, it would have taken ten times as long.

The actual contract wouldn't be drawn up until I traveled to Axeholm and got official permission to open a new trade route, but Valbo was too enthused to wait. He told me, "No matter what the governor says, we're going to see this project to the end!"

Even at this foundational stage, the forest giants were being put to clever use. The dwarves had them start by clearing out a space in the forest for storing and transporting materials.

The seven-meter-tall giants could swing their axes and take down an adult tree in minutes. It would take a whole team of grown men to lift a tree once it fell, but a giant could manage it easily alone. Another giant picked up the felled trees and cut off the branches to make round logs. They completely removed all the roots left in the ground using a three-meter-long pickaxe, then used a shovel of the

same size to fill in the hole and level the land.

Watching all of this unfold made me think about how such environmental destruction would cause a lot of anger in modern-day Japan.

The logs and branches were carefully stored for future export and sale in Axeholm. Some of them were also set aside for building temporary housing for the workers and providing fuel for the castle.

The skills of the nearby village proved vital in machining the logs and branches to increase their value as a commercial product. It also gave them a temporary boost to their income, so it was a win-win situation for everyone involved.

“Hey, Margilus! Lord Wizard! Look at this!”

Amid all the activity, Valbo found time to put together a proposal for me.

Instead of just building a highway, he suggested expanding the area around Castle Getaeus into a proper town.

“And just like that,” said Valbo, “We’d have a base where anyone could come to procure a whole heap of lumber, just four or five days away from Axeholm. Mark me, what you’ve got lying around in this courtyard would vanish into a dwarven wagon in seconds.”

“This is a great idea...”

I examined the blueprints that Valbo had presented to me so confidently.

The drawings laid out a plan to clear and flatten the area around the castle, and then build rows of inns, homes, and warehouses. This would all be contained inside a new outer castle wall, and the main tower and residential quarters of the existing keep would be expanded. It would basically turn the whole of Mount Farsight into a castle city ten times the fortifications’ original size.

According to the calculations detailed on the plans, the town would be able to accommodate one thousand residents and five hundred visitors at a time. The castle would be able to house a garrison of five hundred soldiers.

“Hmm ...”

“Bwa ha ha! If I couldn’t build at least this much with the support you’re giving us, then I daresay my ancestors would disown

me!”

“It truly is splendid, but...how much would this cost? How long would it take to build?”

Valbo stroked his beard. “If we can keep on using those giants, then it would go much faster... Right now, the people of Axeholm aren’t in a position to work freely, so let’s call it three years. But even if the giants sped up the job, the cost wouldn’t change much. We’d still need the same amount of stone and iron...so I reckon the cost would be...let’s see here...”

Hmm? Not in a position to work freely?

As I tilted my head to contemplate that comment, Valbo held up all five fingers of his thick, strong hand.

“500,000 gold coins?” I asked.

“Hah!” Valbo laughed. “Of course not! Try five million. Which includes the highway construction.”

That was no small sum of money...we were talking something in the neighborhood of fifty billion yen. Which wasn’t to say it was a terrible deal—in Japan, you’d probably struggle to build an entire town from scratch even at that price. But I didn’t have that kind of money just sitting around. Even my Infinity Bag had limits.

Naturally, I was already trying to think of a way I could get my hands on five million gold coins.

I didn’t really care about whether I lived in a big castle. But the first step in realizing my plan was to have my own base. A place from which I could gain the trust of the people in this world. It was obviously better to build it on the most solid foundation possible.

“If only we had a quarry somewhere conveniently close by...the right stone makes all the difference.”

I perked up. “Stone?”

With a single word, the dwarf had me excited all over again. But my idea involved the kind of cheating, rule-breaking exploit that would have any game master worth his salt calling foul.

“As a consequence of this spell, a stone wall five meters high, fifteen meters wide, and thirty centimeters thick will be created in a location in my line of sight. *Wall of Stone!*”

In the field outside the castle yard, I conjured up a seamless,

unbroken wall of rock. Valbo was momentarily taken aback, but he immediately started hammering me with questions.

“Great galloping gadflies, Margilus! You really did pull a stone wall out of thin air! So you’re saying we should use this for building materials? But...won’t it disappear?”

I had already learned through my experiments at the Sorcerers’ Guild that sorcerers could create pillars of stone and ice using mana alone. But every single one of them lost its cohesion and returned to its original form in a short amount of time.

“Don’t worry,” I told Valbo. “Even though this wall was created out of magic, it won’t disappear. It will stay like this forever.”

“Really?!”

Valbo ran up to the stone wall and started pawing all over it. Dwarves had a strong tendency toward skepticism, but they could toss aside old beliefs rather quickly in the face of firm evidence.

“Wow, this here is good stuff! It’s a bit harder than I’d like, but there are no faults or variations in the stone at all! That does reduce the visual appeal a smidge, but it’s plenty durable, and we’ll be able to cut down on the machining time. Can you make as many of these stone walls as you want?!”

“I mean, there are limits...”

“Well, that makes sense...” Valbo stroked his beard. “If it’s just a small volume, then it won’t really affect the construction time that much...”

“Just nine times a day,” I said. “I can also make iron walls that are essentially the same, nine additional times a day.”

Valbo was agog. “Nine times?! And iron, too?!”

Wall of Stone and *Wall of Iron* were Rank 5 and Rank 6 spells respectively, so that meant a maximum of nine casts of each.

So...that meant if I used the spell consecutively, then I could build huge stacked-up masses of stone and iron. On peaceful days like this when I didn’t anticipate any battles, I was essentially a one-man mass-production machine.

I could even go straight to wherever the materials were needed to cast, so it would also reduce transportation costs and time. *No, not reduce...more like practically eliminate.*

Valbo grinned. “So I guess wizards are good for more than just breaking things.”

However, I imagined my little maneuver was conjuring up

materials that we would otherwise have needed to procure from actual Sedian laborers. I doubted this project would cause any issues, but if I used magic as the solution to too many problems, it might have a negative effect on the local economy. I needed to be careful.

I suggested a few revisions to the plan. "First of all, the buildings in the town can be made of wood. We also don't need to remodel the castle keep anytime soon."

"I suppose we could always wait until there are more residents before we realize my master plan..."

Valbo and I discussed the details for a while before we came to a conclusion.

"We need one year. The cost will be three million gold coins."

We settled on a plan that didn't require me to be there all day, every day magicking up materials. I needed plenty of time to travel around as issues came up.

The budget would leave my pockets pretty much empty. Thankfully, I wouldn't need to pay it all as one lump sum in advance, and if money got tight, I could always sell a few of my magic items.

The priority was construction of the highway, but the expansion work could still start within a few months.

"This isn't final," I cautioned Valbo. "I'll still need to discuss the fine points of the contract with Ild when he returns."

"What? Aren't you the laird of the castle? Your word is law!"

"I'm not that kind of lord. I don't rule by decree."

It was only natural not to make a decision this massive all on my own.

Valbo rubbed his hands together fiendishly. "Eh heh heh. I'm dying to get started..."

He'd gone beyond euphoria into an entirely new and vaguely creepy level of enthusiasm. But I pulled his feet back to the ground for just a little while longer. "Sorry to keep interrupting, but I actually had something else to ask you about."

This next concern was one near and dear to my heart. Specifically, I wanted to set up a proper bathhouse.

Valbo snapped right out of it. "I thought you were a human. You like baths?"

The humans of this world almost never soaked in a hot bath. They only bathed in cold water or wiped down their bodies with hot, damp cloths. I'd seen two public bathhouses in Relis, but they were generally reserved for the ill and the elderly.

On the other hand, dwarves worked and lived underground, and they tended to get very dirty. They also tended to come in contact with hot springs on a regular basis, so taking baths was an important habit in their culture. It was perfect.

"Of course," I said. "Baths are important."

"Yes! That's exactly right!" Before I knew it, Valbo and I were vigorously shaking hands. "In that case, I'll make sure there are one or two bathhouses worked into the plans. No additional charge! We just so happen to have plenty of lumber and stone for it. Can we use coal as the heat source?"

"Yes, by all means."

Surprisingly, the dwarves were already using basic coal-fueled boilers. In addition, it seemed that they were also using "heavy fire-water" that bubbled out of the ground for light and fuel.

It was only a matter of time before they invented guns and steam engines...

Chapter 13

IT HAD BEEN A FEW DAYS since the dwarves started laying the groundwork for building the highway. At Valbo's request, every morning I set out and cast *Create Monster*, *Infinity*, *Wall of Stone*, and *Wall of Iron* nine times each.

In other words, there were twenty-seven forest giants laboring under the dwarves' instructions, each one working fiercely to clear out the forest and dig through mountainous earth. The work was loud, but it was nothing compared to the sounds of construction sites in modern-day Japan.

It was also time to use the *Create Earth* spell for the large-scale development that would take even giants too much time to complete. In only ten magical seconds, I finished a project that would normally take humans months. Needless to say, Valbo's jaw dropped.

With my spells, and the civil engineering capabilities of the giants, the original timeline had been sped up even more than we initially thought.

But...ever since coming to Sedia, I had grown accustomed to a life without the bustling, 'artificial' sounds of modern life. In a word, the project was *noisy*.

"I'm sorry," I said to the young folk gathered around me. "It feels like I've been ignoring you..."

"Oh...no, not at all."

I had gathered the boys and girls who had once served as Mage Knights-in-training. We were in the courtyard of the main tower, so the construction sounds weren't as bothersome here.

I'd heard from Mora that they were getting impatient. It was true that I'd brushed them aside, so I started off by apologizing.

"You've been taking care of our friends," said Log. "We...we don't mind waiting."

"We're fine," said Daya.

Tel was always mature, but even Log and Daya were unexpectedly forgiving, so I relaxed a bit. Maybe Mora had spoken to them already.

Now that I think about it, they're the youngest people in the castle—only children. I need to make sure I pay enough attention to them.

"I'm now going to teach you the technology for making golems," I said. "As you might expect, we aren't going to try and do everything all at once. While you're learning, you'll still have to help around the castle. Can you manage that?"

Log shrugged. "It's still way easier than what we had to do in training, so that's fine by me..."

"Good. First of all, I want to give you this. I apologize in advance, but we only have one copy. You'll need to share it."

Golem production was a special *D&B* skill, the ultimate version of *Create Monster*. In order to master it, one first had to understand the basics of alchemy. The book I handed Log was *A Primer for Alchemists*, part of Geo's Alchemy Tool Set. The contents outlined a faux alchemy that my game master and I had come up with based on the contents of the *D&B* rulebook.

Setting the content aside for a moment, the fact that the words had already been translated into the Sedian language was surely the Watcher's doing.

The Watcher... If he was going to take so many liberties helping me out, then maybe he could have gone ahead and erased troublesome, dreary things like Epicenters, too.

Oh well...

While I was absorbed in my thoughts, Tel timidly started to ask me a question. Log and Daya were looking at their feet for some reason.

I glanced over. "What is it?"

Log bluntly spoke up on Tel's behalf. "We can't read this!"

I blinked. "Eh?"

"Log and I can't read," Tel confirmed grimly.

Daya had a depressed look on her face too. I remembered then that the young man, Nox, had mentioned that reading, writing, and arithmetic were considered rare skills. The literacy rate in this world probably wasn't very high. I'd taken education for granted since Mora could not only read and write, but also understood all the math I'd thrown at her.

I still couldn't believe it. "Didn't they teach you at the guild's training academy?"

"No..."

I would've thought that if Heridol prided himself so much on the aptitude of his Mage Knights, they would at least be taught to read and write. But I guess he probably prioritized enhancing their magical powers at the expense of all else. Fundamental skills got left by the wayside.

"Umm..." While I was busy thinking about the educational policy of the Sorcerers' Guild, Log's expression grew more and more uneasy. "Does this mean we'll have to quit and go home...?"

Damn, I'm worrying them. "Don't be silly. Of course not."

Tel frowned. "But Log and I can't study..."

"Hmm."

Log and Daya hung their heads. Tel looked uneasy.

I thought things would go faster if they could read *A Primer for Alchemists* on their own to get an understanding of the basics, but I hadn't thought things through. I'd have to teach them from the very beginning in a classroom format.

But how are they supposed to manage in class if they can't even take notes?

I came to my decision quickly. "If things are like this, then that just means we need to start by teaching you how to read."

I could understand the language of Sedia, but I didn't know enough of the world's common knowledge and customs to really be a good teacher. What's more, I didn't have the hours in the day I'd need to do the job. *I don't think Sedam or Ild are suited for the role, plus I really need them to stay focused on their current tasks. And of course, Mora already has too much work to do.*

I considered Clara for a moment, but in the end, I decided Torrad would be the best choice. I told the children I was going to introduce them to him.

"Well...okay..."

"Okay?" I have the fullest confidence that Torrad will be a great teacher, so don't worry."

"That's not it," Log said quietly. He had an uneasy—no, a suspicious look in his eyes. "Why are you so...nice to us?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? A great wizard wouldn't abandon a child in need."

Given how serious they were, my words maybe came off a bit rude. But they needed to hear them. They were children. They had the right to be protected by adults. That might not be what people

expected in Sedia, but this was my castle, and we'd live by my rules.

I see... It seems like I've been more worried about those kids than I realized.

When I went to Torrad to discuss his new role, he was very agreeable. "Perfect. I'll mold them into virtuous, obedient devotees of my lady Ashginea."

I frowned. "Hey."

"Hah! Just a joke, Margilus."

It occurred to me then that in Sedia, priests really did receive powers from their gods, and so those gods probably really existed. Or at least, it seemed that way. *I should be careful to respect the way they do things here when I talk about matters of religion.*

This was the perfect opportunity to try and get some more information.

"By the way, I've heard that Ashginea is the goddess of winter, correct?"

Torrad nodded. "Yes, and what of it?"

"It seems a bit paradoxical to me. Her having the aspect of 'winter,' and yet also being the guardian deity that protects us from the daemons, don't really seem to naturally go together. Is there a reason why she governs both?"

I'd never really had a chance to hear much about the mythology of Sedia.

A long time ago, I'd created my own original world for an RPG campaign, so it wasn't like I had no interest in that kind of lore, but there was always so much else to do.

Things were different now. I wanted all the information about Epicenters that I could get my hands on. If the goddess Ashginea was related to the daemons in any way, then who knew what I might be able to glean from studying her? If I was really lucky, I might even learn something about the Watcher.

"Well," said Torrad, "Ashginea's status as a guardian deity isn't really connected to the daemons at all."

So much for being really lucky.

"The title has more to do with... Margilus, have you heard of the dragonkin?"

“No, I haven’t. Is there such a species in Sedia?”

Was I suddenly going to get a critical piece of information here?

I’m not sure, but I definitely want to hear more...

Torrad was kind and thorough in his explanation. “Not in Sedia, precisely. It seems their empire lies upon the southern continent. They are a people with at least as much, if not more, intelligence than humans. About two hundred years ago, the Dragon Empire arrived at the southern edge of Sedia and began a process of colonization. At the time, those lands belonged to Land Barthes, a nation that revered the god of war.”

The two of them definitely went to war, didn’t they?

“At first, the Dragon Empire presented ample tribute and negotiated in good faith, and so Land Barthes gradually ceded more and more territory to them. Some fifty years ago, the empire started to invade in earnest.”

Called it.

Just when I thought Sedia had more than enough problems dealing with the daemons. But what surprised me the most was that I hadn’t heard so much as a word about this until now.

I guess that was further proof that this world wasn’t a game. There was no GM to tell me all the important information about the world, and no guidebook containing all its secrets. I needed to continue to build my knowledge as a denizen of Sedia.

(I actually didn’t learn this tidbit until much later, but while the dragons lived in the south, there were giants in the north.)

Torrad continued. “At first, Land Barthes was losing, and was forced to give up large swathes of its territory. However, the Empire’s advance ended as quickly as it began.”

“Huh?”

“Dragonkin don’t do well in the cold. They weren’t able to handle our northern winters. No matter how much they fought during the summer, once the cold came, they were forced to retreat... This happened many times before the Dragon Empire called for a truce.”

“I see. And so it is ‘winter,’ and the lady who rules it, that is the protector of humanity.”

I remembered that there was a sizable mountain range to the south. Someone told me once that the climate changed drastically once you made it to the other side.

“Likewise, when snow falls, the daemons seem to be less active.

Ashginea is a popular deity in the South. She's held to be the wife of Langer, the god of war and the patron deity of the Land Barthes nation."

"Hmm." Only one thing came to mind as I looked at Torrad's face. "Hey, Torrad."

"Yes?"

"Is there still a truce in place? I mean, there's no chance the Dragon Empire would start a massive invasion, is there?"

"Ha ha ha. The truce has been in force for decades. I can confidently swear by the name of the winter goddess Ashginea that what you fear will never come to pass."

All the same, I wonder.

Our fate is in your hands, O Winter Goddess...

Chapter 14

I WAS FINALLY GETTING USED TO the constant noise of giant-fueled dwarven construction.

Ild and Nox had come back, leading the soldiers and servants they'd recruited in Relis. They'd brought a modest handful of servants and some thirty soldiers, not to mention a plethora of livestock and wagons.

That was all well and good. But as I looked down from the main tower at the soldiers that were streaming through the castle gates, I felt uneasy.

"Reyha," I wondered out loud, staring down at the courtyard. "Why do they look so restless?"

Only then did I hear Reyha's soft footsteps padding up behind me. I hadn't perceived even a whisper of her presence until then.

Lately I'd realized that the sound of Reyha's feet was her signal to me that she'd released her invisibility magic.

Reyha spoke as ever with utmost seriousness as she knelt beside me. "I would wager that it is due to all the construction along the approach to the castle. Likely they beheld the giants."

"Oh. I see." I had to admit that made sense.

Even here on our side of the wall, they were being bombarded by the sound of huge trees being cut down. Seeing fully twenty-seven forest giants, each one comparable in size to the average Relis home, would be surprise enough in itself. Seeing them hard at work on a civil engineering project under the command of dwarves would be even more strange.

They had probably heard rumors of me as well. Now that they'd seen evidence of my abilities with their own eyes, they'd be that much easier to talk to. Things had actually worked out perfectly.

Ild had sent for me, so I decided it was time to descend from the main tower and speak face-to-face with the new arrivals.

"Margilus! The Great Wizard Margilus!"

The moment they saw me, the thirty soldiers lined up in the courtyard started chanting out my name. The servants both new and

old had gathered to watch as well. It was quite a striking scene.

“I am indeed the wizard Geo Margilus, lord of Castle Getaeus.”

I felt a chill run through me.

Thirty young people had gathered in response to my call, all of them soldiers. I planned to stand on the front lines myself when we fought against the daemons, but even so, there would definitely be a time when I would have to ask these people to put their lives at risk.

I couldn't value the lives of my senior companions more than theirs. I now bore the weight of their lives and future.

I didn't see Sedam or Clara anywhere.

I struck the ground firmly with the base of my staff, then used it to support my weight. Ild stood a step behind me, and Reyha knelt a few feet away. I saw Mora on the other side of the soldiers, tightly clenching her fists.

I approached a young man standing at the front of their ranks. He looked no more than twenty years old. His young face was red with excitement and he looked at me with sparkling eyes.

“What is your name?” I asked him.

“I am Lend, Lord Margilus, sir!”

“Lend. It's nice to meet you.”

When I offered my hand, he opened his eyes wide with astonishment. He wiped his own hand on the leg of his pants before shaking mine. He had a surprisingly powerful grip.

I wouldn't be able to have a deep relationship with every young soldier, but I could at least learn their names and faces.

I moved to the next. “What about you?”

“Ahh! I'm Daath, milord! Margilus, sir! You honor me!”

“And you?”

I shook hands with every one of them, including the servants. When I was done, I climbed the stairs in front of the main tower and looked down over them.

“For ages, the people of Sedia have been threatened by the daemonic scourge. People have accepted it as an inevitable fact of life. But today, we set out to break that cycle! I ask you to join me! Lend your strength to mine!”

“Margilus! Margilus!”

The cheers went on for some time, echoing throughout the castle.

“They all seemed rather...enthusiastic,” I said. “Zealous, even.”

Ild smiled. “I would imagine so.”

After inspecting the troops, I invited Ild to my quarters to hear his complete report.

When he'd set out to recruit soldiers through the Relis City Council, he'd gotten nearly three hundred applicants. Ild had interviewed every candidate personally, and after a careful review, he'd selected thirty for the job.

“I certainly factored in their experience and physical strength, but above all, I valued the extent to which they sympathized with your objective.”

As a result, our recruits were mostly those who had lost at least one family member to the daemons. There were plenty of people out there who were totally consumed by a thirst for revenge against the daemons, but Ild decided not to hire any of those.

“So,” said Ild, “Around half of your soldiers don't actually have any field experience. My apologies for that.”

“No, that's fine,” I said. “Actually, you chose perfectly. You did every bit as great as I expected.”

Having said that, there was no avoiding the fact that I felt conflicted about their passionate loyalty. *Sure, it's far better than being disrespected, but isn't blind loyalty also a problem? Or maybe I'm just being too Japanese about it...*

Apparently, the women hired as servants were mainly widows who had lost their husbands or families to the daemons.

Ild produced a sheet of paper. “This is a list of all the new soldiers, servants, and material acquisitions.”

The contents of the note went as follows.

EMPLOYED PERSONNEL:

30 soldiers (men in their twenties or thirties)

5 servants (all middle-aged women)

1 stablemaster (an older middle-aged man)

2 stablehands (both young men)

PURCHASED ITEMS:

40 sets of soldiers' armor (including spares)
maintenance tools and materials for armor
uniforms, clothing, and bedding for soldiers and servants
livestock (cattle, pigs, chickens)
5 horses, suitable as mounts
1 passenger carriage

"Mora and her team really need more people, so the servants don't come a moment too soon. What's this about a stablemaster...?"

Ild explained. "It'll be his job to manage the horses and livestock. The pigs and chickens would be all right without a professional to look after them, but only an expert can properly care for horses."

"Perfect," I said.

"Honestly, if I had my way, I would have also hired a healer and an accountant. I didn't have enough time to look."

"You make a good point. Speaking of which, you purchased tools for weapons maintenance, but shouldn't you have also brought a blacksmith?"

"We do need a blacksmith, but since we have a relationship with Axeholm, I thought it would be better to see if we can hire a dwarf."

I understood immediately. If a family of architects had that much skill, then it would make sense that a dwarf blacksmith would be just as remarkable. I wondered if they could make something like mithril swords.

The mention of dwarves reminded me of something.

"Actually, Valbo came to me with a proposal..." I went on to discuss with Ild the idea of expanding not only the highway, but also building a town.

Ild nodded eagerly. "I think it's an excellent plan. It's true that it'll help us in matters of trade, but more importantly, you're bound to expand your power and influence in the future. If the castle stays this size, it won't be long before it starts to feel awfully cramped."

"You're likely right..."

We had our soldiers and our servants. Castle Getaeus was

stocked with all the basic equipment and personnel that it required.

Clara had also returned from her trip to Relis to request help investigating the warrior clan. Our team hadn't all been together like this in a long time.

I decided that we should have a meeting in order to make sure the castle was functioning as it should. The war room on the second floor of the main tower was the perfect size for such a meeting, so I called everyone in.

"Our objective is to protect people from the daemons," I began. "Therefore, there are many differences between me and a normal lord, but I do plan to fulfill my duties properly. I need your wisdom in order to achieve that end."

I felt confident we were all on the same page.

Ild quickly laid out the main points at issue. "Now, the very minimum obligation we have is to maintain security in the surrounding realm. Therefore, it is necessary to regularly patrol the Lawful Way and the three villages in our territory. We have thirty new soldiers... If you include the ones we recruited in the village, that makes thirty-three. I think we've got enough bodies to make it work."

Sedam spoke next. "Before we send them out into the wild, I want to concentrate on getting them trained up properly, here at the castle."

"Wouldn't it be better to have the dark elves continue their own patrols in parallel with the soldiers'?"

The discussions were constructive, and our plan of action was decided without the need for much input from me.

First, Djirk would take the position of captain to train and lead the soldiers. Ted would be deputy captain and conduct both platoon-based march training and patrols across our territory.

The soldiers would be divided into three platoons of eleven members each. They would rotate between patrol duty, training, and castle security (including breaks in between).

Sedam would train the soldiers in archery and generally be stationed at the castle. Fijika and Torrad would provide military strength in case of emergency. I asked Fijika to take up an official role as messenger and Torrad to serve as castle priest.

The dark elves would continue to guard the inside and outside of the castle and take turns helping the maids with their work.

In addition to his duties as a priest, Torrad would also teach Log and the other Mage Knights how to read and write. The soldiers and

servants would also be allowed to take Torrad's classes if they wished.

Naturally, Ild would continue to manage the castle on a macro scale in his capacity as the castle steward. Nox from Backwood Village said he would train as an apprentice clerk.

Mora would continue as chief maid. Apparently, she was already getting along quite well with the five newly hired women. We were lucky to have her.

Once all the roles of the castle staff were established, Ild raised a new agenda.

"This is more of a report, not something we need to make an immediate decision on. But I thought you should see the current financial situation of Castle Getaeus."

Ild showed us a table with the following information.

CASTLE GETAEUS FINANCES (ONE MONTH)

INCOME

None

EXPENSES

Personnel Wages

Castle Steward (1): 120 G

Clerk (1): 20 G

Magic Advisor (1): 130 G

Adventurers (6): 540 G

Scouts (5): 300 G

Chief Maid (1): 30 G

Soldiers (33): 900 G

Servants (8): 120 G

Stable Head (1): 90 G

Stable Assistants (2): 30 G

Daily Necessities: 120 G

Armor Maintenance: 30 G

Fuel: 120 G

Inventory: 100 G

Charitable Expenses: 50 G

Castle Lord's Living Expenses: 300 G

Castle Management & Maintenance: 400 G

BALANCE

3,400 gold coins in deficit

There was silence.

"That's one big deficit," Djirk said, stunned.

Damn. Our castle didn't have enough income. Actually, it had zero income. Well, that wasn't really a surprise.

Ild had already shown me the report before our meeting. Actually, at first Ild had kept all of our salaries and expenses very low (although they were, of course, reasonable).

I had never run a business, but I did know that we weren't hurting for funds so much that we needed an immediate profit to keep the castle afloat. This table was the result of me asking him to lift everyone's wages to increase morale and make sure everyone could work comfortably.

Incidentally, I had considered a sharp reduction in my lifestyle expenses as castle lord, but Ild had refused. (I'd also gotten an earful from Clara and Mora about it.)

"Three of the soldiers were drafted from Edgewood Village, right? Are you going to pay them?" asked Sedam.

"They won't get a salary, but we need to feed them."

Ild piped up. "Let me explain. These labor costs include more than just salary paid out. It includes all expenses such as food, procuring necessary equipment, clothing expenses, and anything else that might come up."

"I-I see," Sedam said. "There's sure a lot to think about." He wasn't someone typically prone to stammering. *It seems economics isn't his specialty.* Djirk and the others had similar expressions on their faces.

"So, these figures assume we're purchasing food and other daily necessities from somewhere else?" I asked.

“Yes,” said Ild. “If we manage the territory efficiently, we can likely reduce these expenses by ten or twenty percent. This is just an estimate.”

Clara was the only one who managed to calmly continue the discussion. “In the meantime, we can probably rely on continuous tax income from the three nearby villages... We’d just need to make a bit of an investment beforehand.” Her poise handling this issue was exactly what I would expect from a noble’s daughter.

Ild nodded. “And once the soldiers learn how to hunt in the forest, we can reduce the food expenses even more.”

I gestured at the papers. “I think you can all see from this report that establishing a source of income has become an urgent matter for this castle.”

It wasn’t something you would expect to hear from a great magic user, but it had to be said. The deficit wasn’t a problem right now, but it would have to be remedied at some point.

I continued. “When we’re done here, we’ll form teams to visit Axeholm. It’s vital that we get their consent to formally open a line of trade.”

Clara tipped up her chin. “In that case, I will accompany you this time. Negotiations require courtesy and knowledge of local customs.”

“I’ll leave it to you.” Sedam shrugged.

“Oh, *will* you now!” Clara laughed brightly.

To the inexperienced lord of the castle, this scene was like seeing the shining sun after a violent storm at sea.

Although I had plenty of problems, I had finally gained a foothold at Castle Getaeus.

Now I would begin the massive task of expanding the anti-daemon alliance.

The several days it took for the new soldiers and servants to acclimate to castle life were relatively calm. The soldiers were surprised to find the warrior clan camped out in the courtyard, but there were no major problems.

Once things had settled down inside the castle, it was time to head for Axeholm.

Ild would come to take care of negotiations and Clara would come as a consultant. Ted and three soldiers would escort us and carry the luggage.

It went without saying that Reyha was coming, too.

I left Sedam in charge of the castle this time. The other adventurers and the Four Dark Elf Sisters had to stay to guard the castle and to help with the soldiers' training.

Also...

"Just so you know, if something happens, it's my job to hunt you down."

Lade decided he was coming along, and he made sure I knew why. If a beautiful swordswoman had said something like that to me, I might have thought she was flirting, but this was Lade we were talking about here. He was deathly serious.

"Those are Margilus's bags, so take good care of them."

"You got it, boss!"

Ted was playing the role of mentor (I guess?) to the three young soldiers recruited from the village during patrol. It seemed to me like Ted was actually a bit younger than them, but he'd definitely been a soldier longer than they had.

Still, the three had been lumberjacks, so they were strong and brave and kept up with Djirk's training regimen. They'd been conscripted against their will for the crime of attempted assault against me, but if they kept on working hard, then I planned to formally hire them at the same wage as all the other soldiers.

I gave Sedam an Arcane Postcard. He could use it to get in touch with me in case of an emergency.

"Make sure you come back before I die of boredom," Sedam said. He definitely looked like he wanted to come with us, all right.

Mora, on the other hand, looked worried. "Mister Margilus, please be careful."

Everyone else at the castle also came out to see us off.

Ild took a moment to give me some advice. "Remember, the land east of Yulei Village abuts the Twilight Wastelands, and that makes it extremely dangerous. Magical beasts sometimes appear, even on the road to Axeholm."

Weren't you the one that insisted on taking such a dangerous road for your business? No, I couldn't think like that. They were worried about me, which was awfully sweet of them.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful. Mora, you'll take good care of the castle while I'm gone, won't you?"

"You bet!"

"Oi!"

As I was patting Mora on the head, a boisterous voice cut in, heedless of the moment. It was Valbo, who'd been working diligently on highway construction.

"Master Valbo," I said. "What seems to be the problem?"

The dwarf folded his arms. "You were going to traipse right off without giving us today's stone and iron!"

"Oh... Right."

He was right—without me, there was no way to procure materials for free. But honestly, after using my spells to the max every day, there was a veritable mountain of materials left unused. I could be gone for a month, and they'd have more than enough.

"Open, Gate of Magic."

Still, better too much than too little. It would be a waste not to use the spells I'd taken the time to charge. I immediately sent my imagined self into the spellbook archive.

I could definitely use a break from this particular line of work...

I stood within the confines of my inner world.

I had a strange feeling in my chest as my imagined self touched the tome that contained *Wall of Stone*. I'd grown awfully tired of this sight. The document glowed, soon transforming into dice, which I threw at the bookstand.

Clack, clack!

"Hmm?"

I looked at the two decahedral dice and froze. The black and white dice had stopped on 0 and 0. The total of the roll was 100, which meant I had failed at casting the spell.

"Huh?!"

Normally the dice would shine brightly, turning into magical power that would fly away over my head, but instead, they imploded and disappeared.

My physical and imagined selves cried out in unison.

“Seriously...?”

Clara heard my shout out and quickly came to my side. “Wh-what is it?” I had never once failed at casting a spell since arriving in Sedia, so it was only natural she’d be surprised.

I could hardly believe it. “I fumbled...”

Clara furrowed her brow when I let that little piece of RPG terminology slip. “Huh?”

Valbo and everyone else looked on suspiciously.

I lowered my voice for Clara’s ears alone. “Er, no. It’s just... Can I tell you something in confidence?”

She frowned. “What’s the matter? Be quick about it.”

There were a lot of outsiders around, including dwarves and warriors. I’d explain to my other allies later, but I wanted to tell Clara as soon as possible. I knew she’d get on my case if I didn’t.

I whispered the truth into her ear: that my spells can fail, one out of every hundred times—and that it had just happened, right now.

Clara was taken aback. “Oh. Well... That’s—”

“Mister Geo!” Mora wedged her tiny body in between me and Clara. “What is it? I want to hear, too!”

The two of us were blushing uncomfortably. Mora didn’t normally act like this when she was going about her duties. She was probably feeling excitable since I was about to leave.

I tried to speak as evenly as possible. “Later, Mora.”

Clara said, “I-It has nothing to do with you, Mora.”

“Er... Fine...”

It really wasn’t something she needed to worry about. I patted Mora on the head one last time.

I had relaxed a bit lately, enough that I hadn’t thought about the possibility that a spell would fail. At a time like this, I could just recite the same spell again (as long as I had charged enough for multiple attempts), but if this happened during a battle...

“I don’t rightly know what all this is about, but let’s hurry it up with the materials,” Valbo said blandly.

Chapter 15

IN ORDER TO GET TO AXEHOLM from Castle Getaeus, we would have to travel north. The route demanded we take the Lawful Way to Yulei Village, then use the main trade route for the rest of the way. Yulei Village was a two-day journey, and it took another four days to get to Axeholm. Axeholm was in a more southerly location than the castle, so going north first made for a fairly roundabout path.

If the highway was completed according to Ild and Valbo's plan, it would only take four days to get to Axeholm. That would definitely make trade easier.

Ted barked out orders to his new underlings. "Sakko! Pull on that."

"You got it!"

"I got us some firewood, boss!"

A journey that took multiple days swung between two extremes: boredom and fighting.

Of course, that was only the case for someone like me, who was almost completely useless when it came to setting up the camp tents and preparing food.

I decided to study a bit. If I had spare time sitting around waiting for camp to be set up, I might as well make use of it.

"Ild, can you spare a moment?" I asked.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Is Axeholm facing some sort of problem right now? Valbo implied as much."

Back when we were discussing the expansion plan, Valbo had said something to the effect that Axeholm was not in a place to do construction work. I should have pushed harder for details at the time, but it was too late for that now.

If I were to use tabletop campaigns as a rubric, one-off comments like that from non-player characters could be important hints in advancing the scenario. You needed to take notes, or you might wind up stuck... Failure from lack of information was a real possibility.

Ild pondered the question for a moment. “When I visited Axeholm with Sedam recently, there was something strange in the air. But you’ll have to forgive me—I’m afraid I don’t know many details.”

From what little Ild was able to tell me, there was curious activity in the dwarven settlement. Though groups of aggressive soldiers and technicians could be seen running around the place, it actually seemed like the laborers had plenty of free time. When he and Sedam had asked the dwarves about the reason, they wouldn’t say a word.

Their only response was, “It’s not something we’d share with humans.”

“Maybe daemons appeared?” I suggested.

Ild shook his head. “If that were the case, I think they would at least give us a warning.”

“What about a war?” Clara had been looking awfully bored, and seized on the chance to jump into our conversation. “It would make sense if the duke of Filsand wanted to take Axeholm.”

That was a new name on me. “Who’s the duke of Filsand?”

I wasn’t ashamed to show my ignorance to my friends. Normally, it was Sedam who was always trying to teach me things, but Ild and Clara explained everything in his stead.

The duke of Filsand was the ruler of the great city of Filsand, a metropolis located east of Axeholm. They said he was related to someone named Velde or something, and ever since occupying the diverse city of Filsand some decades ago, he’d become infamous as a ruthless and greedy ruler.

The story was actually a little familiar to me. “So, he’s the one they call the ‘Wicked Duke’...”

“Well, they’re just rumors,” Ild said. “If we were to believe all the rumors we heard, we might as well start calling you the ‘Dread Wizard.’”

“...Gafoon,” Clara muttered suddenly.

“Huh?”

I held up my hands uselessly for a moment when Clara blurted out that odd term. *What in the world is a ‘Gafoon’?*

“Anyway,” I said, trying to get things back on track. “What kind of city is Filsand?”

“Well, it’s a port city with a thriving trade industry. The kingdoms neighboring Velde—Land Barthes and Shrendal—are all

connected by the sea.”

“That’s a huge advantage...”

“Perhaps so,” said Ild, “but in order to reach Land Barthes or Shrendal via the sea lanes, you have to pass through the southern seas ruled by the Dragon Empire, so the cost is often high.”

“The dragonkin again... Does Axeholm trade with Filsand as well?”

Clara nodded. “Yes, of course. The dwarves absolutely love getting their hands on rare ores and technologies from foreign countries. There’s never a shortage of merchants coming and going in their lands.”

Ild added, “But there are steep mountains between Filsand and Axeholm. Magical beasts frequently appear there. And taking a detour around them to the north means passing along the Twilight Wastelands where the undead are known to wander. Truth be told, all manner of trade is risky at the moment.”

Considering the current situation, and the character of the duke of Filsand, he might well consider sending out his army to loot and pillage a faster and more effective path to wealth than trading.

But I was extremely curious about this city of Filsand. What we needed most of all right now was trade. If the mountains were perilous and there was no safe route, all we had to do was use magic to support the construction of a new one.

The idea was already taking shape in my mind. “Maybe, just maybe...hear me out on this, Ild... What if there was a route straight through the center of the continent that connected Filsand to Axeholm and moved on to Castle Getaeus?”

That was all I needed to say. Ild knew exactly what I was thinking. He glanced at me and then nodded. “It would be extremely useful. Even now, there are caravans and merchants traveling to Filsand on land routes from Relis. However, most are attacked by beasts or the undead of the Twilight Wastelands along the way, and suffer heavy damage. If there was a safe route that passed through Castle Getaeus...” The normally cool and collected Ild swallowed audibly. “The profits would be enormous.”

Was that so? If Ild approved, then I could proceed with confidence. Of course, I would have to ask the dwarf experts if it was technically feasible. There were also diplomatic issues to consider; we would need the consent and cooperation of both Axeholm and Filsand.

“With your unique magic, Margilus, such a plan would be

possible, but..." Clara folded her arms, taking a moment to select her words. "I'm no expert, but it seems like the problem with Filsand would be its size. For one thing, the ruling duke doesn't get along with King Velde. Moreover, I've heard rumors that the city is a frequent target of barbarian raids."

"Hmmm..."

Clara added, "There's also the question of whether the greedy duke of Filsand will trade fairly with us and the dwarves."

The alliance I'd hoped to form with the world's various countries was at its root designed to fight against the daemons, which differed from a normal military alliance. All member countries needed to be treated as equals for it to work. Likewise, I wanted to stay far away from civil wars, internal disputes, and power struggles.

We shouldn't get involved in other nations' business.

"Speaking of which, you've suddenly become very interested in business, haven't you?" Clara smiled. "Are you worried about all the money flowing out of your very magical pockets?" Clara didn't sound especially concerned. She actually seemed to be laughing a bit.

Business. I would freely admit that I simply enjoyed developing Castle Getaeus. But there were other good reasons, too.

"It's not as if the daemons will only show up within the Ryuse Alliance. Whether it's Axeholm or Filsand, the east or the south, everyone is at risk. Without more information, and without being more connected to those faraway places, we can't actually lend them our aid."

"That's right..." Clara's tone darkened subtly. "Nothing has changed."

I thought I had said something rather profound in my persona as the great magic user, but there was Clara, frowning all the more. *Hmmm. If only the Watcher had given me a spell to understand women.*

"Everything all right, Clara?"

She threw up her hands. "Let's just forget about all that for now."

I hesitated. "Eh?"

"The first step is to form an alliance with the Axeholm dwarves and establish a trade deal," Clara said. "Let's not buy the saddle before the horse."

Ild and I could only nod when Clara deployed that Sedian aphorism. The meaning was clear: Don't count your chickens before

they've hatched.

"But in the end," I muttered, "that's how it'll be."

"Like what, exactly?" Clara wondered.

I kept on muttering while eating the meal Ted had prepared for us. He'd become a pretty good cook. "Even if we can persuade the dwarves, I think it'll just end up like...you know..."

"Oh, that," Ild said, nodding.

Clara lifted her brows. "Oh, do come out with it, Margilus. Like *what*?"

Ild explained on my behalf. "In other words, if he shows the extent of his magical powers, the dwarves will feel threatened, just like the Calbanera Knights and the Adventurers' Guild did."

Blonde-haired Clara actually laughed, turning up her nose. "Oh, is *that* what you're on about?"

After hearing about my secret worries, she gracefully crossed her legs and sipped deeply from her cup of tea. "Would it not be worse if your powers were underestimated? I could foresee that very quickly developing into a lose-lose situation for everyone involved. If you're going to tie yourself into knots over something so petty as that...then I say just go wild. Pull out all the stops."

It was so Clara. Such cheerful advice. Ild and Reyha were nodding their heads in agreement.

Under the circumstances, I was impressed that someone could think that way. Well, why not? I already had a negative reputation. It wasn't a bad idea to give an intense impression.

We soon passed the village of Yulei and set out along the trade route that led to Axeholm. It was probably a familiar path for Ild, who'd originally traded primarily with the dwarves, and his directions were impeccable.

The problem was the trade route itself. The road was narrow, the path was unpaved, and the condition of everything around was very poor. The abandoned houses and rocky terrain made it hard to anticipate when thieves or monsters might appear.

I had concerns about the well-being of our three newest recruits, so I asked Reyha to go ahead of us and check for threats, just in case.

“As a matter of fact, when we passed by here the other day, Sedam discovered a magical beast,” Ild revealed. “Fortunately, we were able to hide and let it pass by.”

He was awfully calm for someone who probably couldn’t fight at all. It surprised me. *It was a fantasy. No, wait. That’s not what’s important right now.*

“Does that mean the same beast could still be wandering around out here?” I asked.

Ild nodded gravely. “It certainly could.”

I don’t know if we jinxed it, or if I’d simply tempted fate. But just then, Reyha reappeared, moving like a shadow.

“My lord, I found creatures up ahead—and they’re coming this way.”

“Graaah!”

“Raaah!”

Almost immediately, the monsters appeared just ahead of us. There were three of them. They looked like long-haired dogs—if those dogs were two meters long and sported massive, crocodilian chompers.

They must have been wary of our group’s size and weapons, because they didn’t jump right in for the attack. They kept some distance and let out magnificent roars.

“They’re Fangwolves,” said Ted. “Normally, they’re not that bad...”

His three subordinates timidly clutched their spears.

“Aaagh!”

“Eeeek...!”

Fangwolves. The name was apt. Their large mouths were full of sharp fangs. Their bite looked like it would be a powerful attack.

When Ted said “normally,” he probably meant when he had everyone under Sedam’s command with him. His new recruits definitely weren’t at the level of a seasoned adventuring party.

“They might be calling for their pack,” said Clara.

“Hmph,” Ild grunted.

Clara stood calmly at my side, holding up her sorceress’s staff. Ild stood behind me, looking apologetic. To his credit, he didn’t look scared.

We really don’t need any more creatures showing up. The only reason I even had the ability to calmly think about that possibility was because of my experience fighting daemons.

If this had been a game, then we might have considered the option of letting the new recruits get some fighting in to build up their experience. They were standing there, holding their spears at the ready, but with ghost-white faces and sweat pouring from their brows.

“Hold on for just a minute,” I said. “I’ll prepare a spell...”

My go-to spell for this sort of thing is Create Ogre Platoon. That should work just fine. I started to concentrate.

“Gyaaah!”

Suddenly, a shadow burst out from the bushes to my right. This new Fangwolf aimed right for Clara’s throat, its bright red mouth wide open.

“Graaah!”

The three in front of us also chose that moment to pounce, every one of them lunging for Ted and his green recruits.

I was in the middle of invoking a spell, so there was nothing I could do to react. Just as I resolved to do at least something to protect Clara, I heard a sharp voice.

“Madam!”

The jaw of the Fangwolf going for Clara’s throat was kicked forcefully from directly below.

“Gruh?!”

Needless to say, it was Reyha behind that high kick. *Just how strong are her legs, anyway?* The beast looked like it weighed at least a hundred kilos, but the impact carried it flying up into the air. It spun end-over-end before crashing into the ground.

Clara raised her staff up high. “*Logger’s Ford!*”

“Huh?!” I whirled to glance her way.

Clara hadn’t aimed at the dog who’d attacked her, but at Ted and the others. Judging by her reaction, both Clara and Reyha must have sensed the surprise attack before it came. I realized anew that Clara, like Reyha, was a first-class adventurer.

Her magic words echoed out around us. Countless slender earthen pillars started to appear, protruding from the ground. The pillars were about three meters high, and they formed a circle, barricading Ted and the other recruits.

“Grawr!”

“Raaah!”

The sudden materialization of a wall of pillars seemed to have petrified one of the recruits, but Ted and the others realized that it was built for their protection.

“Now!” Ted shouted. “Weapons forward! Aim for their mouth or stomach... Now! Strike!”

“G-got it!”

“Piece of—! You bastard!”

It seemed the stone pillars weren’t too sturdy. When the Fangwolves struck against them, they swayed with the impact. But they were still a huge help for our fighters.

The recruits desperately plunged their spears through the gaps in the pillars. Ted quickly pierced one through the mouth and forced its body to the ground.

“We don’t have the time for combat lessons,” Clara shouted out, turning her attention to her left. “Reyha!”

“Yah!”

Reyha leaped into action, pursuing the Fangwolf she’d kicked. She jumped over the pillar barricade with light feet, and as she landed, her dagger stabbed deeply into the Fangwolf’s head. The twisted-edged blade, a weapon apparently passed down to her from her people’s foremost assassin, easily penetrated the skull of the beast.

“Yarf?!”

“Grrrr!!”

Reyha showed no mercy to the final wolf. As it tried to flee, she easily anticipated the animal’s each and every move. The blade of her dagger slipped into its throat and cut through cleanly.

In the end, it was thanks to the swift action of Castle Getaeus’s two most beautiful women that we survived the attack. We didn’t want to deal with any more Fangwolves showing up, nor any other monsters, so we didn’t stick around.

Ted chastised one of his men. "Hey, soldier. Eyes up! Don't look so afraid."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

As I watched Ted and the recruits pick up the luggage they had dropped, Clara passed briskly in front of me. She was heading toward a man who had made himself practically invisible: Lade. "Hey, you!"

Lade remained silent.

"Why didn't you do anything?!" Clara's eyebrows lifted in anger as she screamed at Lade. It had been a while since I'd seen her this angry. "You could have defeated all of them by yourself! Am I wrong?!"

Lade's silence continued a moment longer. And then he spoke.

"Don't misunderstand. I don't report to any of you. And I am not your friend."

The massive warrior spoke to our blonde beauty with complete indifference. So that was his reasoning.

"What nonsense! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! To have such strength, and just stand by watch a battle against monsters without so much as lifting a finger?!"

"This...is a tool for killing daemons." Lade grasped the hilt of his greatsword, turning his gaze to stare at me. "And perhaps for killing *him*."

Reyha quickly interposed herself between us, but that's when I stepped up. "Lade, don't misunderstand. She's talking about the obligation of people with power."

Clara fumed. "That's right!"

"But Clara," I cautioned, "you should think about his circumstances, too. It's not like he wants to follow us."

There was silence.

Neither Clara nor Lade said anything. They both looked aggravated. Reyha was still glaring at Lade with a piercing glare, while Ted and the other recruits looked flustered.

There was nothing I could say in this sort of situation that would make everyone happy.

All I could do was lament that there were some times when even a great wizard was powerless. I instructed everyone to get ready to leave.

After the monster attack, we managed to travel smoothly, even if the road was a bumpy, stone-studded mess. We went several days without any big hiccups, until we were about half a day out from Axeholm.

Since there were rocks piled on either side of us and visibility was poor, I sent Reyha ahead to scout, as usual.

She hurried back, deeply alarmed. “My lord! There’s some sort of strange shadow up ahead...!”

I’d almost never seen her look so flustered.

“It looks like some sort of giant,” she told me. “Please be careful.”

“A giant?!” I blurted out.

Clara and I gripped our staves, while Ted and the soldiers clutched their weapons in panic. Even Lade looked nervous.

“It seemed like it hadn’t noticed us yet,” Reyha clarified. “And there was something strange about the way it moved...”

No one said anything, but we all looked puzzled.

“Well,” I said at last, “let’s go take a look.”

If it was just a giant monster, then it probably wasn’t a big threat. Monsters that showed up in large numbers and moved quickly frightened me far more.

As we proceeded carefully along, the first thing I could see were mountains spreading like a wall in the far distance. That was the Iron Fan mountain range. Then there was a single rocky mountain closer to us than the Iron Fans. It was still far away, so I couldn’t see clearly, but it looked like an awfully sturdy peak. If we continued on our current path, we would eventually reach its base. Perhaps this was Axeholm.

And then...

“What is *that*?” Clara wondered.

“A human?” Lade hesitated. “No, it’s too...”

“The proportions are all wrong,” I agreed.

Clara, Lade and I were all staring at something that resembled a human figure. The silhouette of its thick limbs and stout body was rugged but powerful.

It was standing about halfway between us and the rocky

mountain, so we would have to pass by it if we planned to reach the mountain.

Compared to the road it stood on and the surrounding boulders...

“It’s huge.”

“It looks twice the size of the forest giants that serve you, my lord,” said Reyha, gravely serious.

I might have just told myself that bigger monsters weren’t scary, this was something else again. It was like a real-life Transformer.

I also couldn’t help but notice the odd circular formations that surrounded it. Those definitely didn’t look humanoid at all. The closest comparison I could come up with was an amusement park Ferris wheel. It looked like there were five or six of them rising up from the ground, all of them spinning.

“A-are they moving?”

“Hmmm...”

It wasn’t only the round shapes that were moving. The humanoid figure was moving, too. As I watched, it clumsily lifted one arm and bent at the knees. *Is that a dance, an exercise, or what?*

“Wow, boss,” said one recruit. “That sure looks dangerous.”

“Sh-shut up,” said Ted. “Margilus can take care of that in one shot!”

The troops were getting restless. Fortunately, it wasn’t facing this direction just yet.

“Do the dwarves keep such giants as pets?” I looked around for help. “Or perhaps Axeholm is under siege?”

“Oh, erm, Margilus,” Ild called out. We looked at each other a moment, trying to make sense of this odd encounter, before the merchant continued. “Don’t you have some sort of magic that lets you see things from far away? Perhaps you could use that to take a closer look.”

He was right—I had my enchanted Telescope Lens. I pulled it out of my Infinity Bag immediately. “Now, what do we have here...?”

It was a gigantic dwarven statue, dancing in silence right in front of a watermill.

“It’s huge...” I muttered, staring upward.

Even Lade had to admit: “This thing’s amazing...”

It took a full hour before we finally reached the foot of the giant dwarf statue.

I thought Lade was huge at two meters, but standing there with his mouth agape, he looked positively miniscule.

I once saw the Great Buddha at Nara’s Todai-ji shrine, but this was even bigger. It really was as big as a Transformer. It made me want to go back to Tokyo and get an eyeful of the giant Gundam in Odaiba.

Up close, even though it was huge, the statue was still oddly unmistakable as a dwarf. It had a barrel-like body and a huge, round head. It sported thick, long arms and short, stubby legs. Every inch of it was worked from smooth, polished stone.

Our green recruits looked awfully nervous. I couldn’t blame them—they’d only been gone from their village for a short time, and they’d already seen both living giants and a titanic dwarf carved from stone.

“Oh. My. God...”

“Amazing...”

“How did they make this?”

Creeeaaaak!

As the statue moved, the sound of it resonated in our chests. The stone statue begin to slowly twist its upper body, the sound echoing powerfully enough to make the ground rumble.

“It’s moving again,” Clara murmured.

“Interesting,” I said. “It can even bend at the waist.”

The statue was not only huge, it could freely articulate. It could move its limbs as if it was exercising and twist its neck and body. What’s more, it definitely wasn’t a golem or any other kind of construct—Clara had made sure there was no mana or enchantment involved.

“It’s so spectacular, I could stare at it all day,” Ild spoke suddenly. “I’m glad you both like it.” There was a hint of pride in his voice. I realized he had been to Axeholm many times for trade, so it was natural that he already knew about this statue.

“I don’t know if I like it, but I’m certainly in awe,” Clara said.

“Did the dwarves build this?” I wondered aloud.

“Yes, that’s right,” Ild said. “I don’t know the story behind it, but apparently it’s called Kadrak. It took fifteen years to complete.”

“How does it move?” Lade asked. “Is it powered by those spinning things there?”

Ild nodded. “Yes, that’s right. Apparently, the power from the watermills turning is transmitted to the statue by some sort of contraption. I don’t really know the details...”

Lade still wasn’t satisfied. “But how can such small watermills make enough power to move a statue of that size?”

Behind the dwarf statue—or perhaps I should call it Kadrak—there were four watermills lined up, each one ten meters high. They caught the water falling from the aqueduct, gracefully rotating in unison. The aqueduct seemed to stretch as far off as the rocky mountains in the distance.

I understood that it was being powered by the watermill, but Lade was still eagerly asking Ild questions. It occurred to me that this was the most I’d ever heard him speak.

“A long time ago, I heard that they used gears and springs to build up power before transmitting it to the statue,” Ild went on.

“Wow... Dwarves really are awesome,” I said quietly, looking up as the statue started to lift both its arms. They moved awfully slowly. It seemed like it might take half an hour before they rose all the way up.

Clara had been silent, but now she asked a question of her own. “Why did the dwarves go to the trouble of making such a silly monument? Does it have some sort of significance?”

Ild smiled. “Ahh, I once asked the very same question...”

Apparently, the Dauron dwarf that Ild had spoken with gave a less than satisfactory reply: “It doesn’t mean anything. We just wanted to make something grand.”

“W-well,” Clara said, “it does seem to have *some* significance, as it denotes the entrance to Axeholm...”

Lade folded his thick arms. “Mmn. It reflects their romantic sensibility.”

“Hrrrm,” I murmured to myself, deeply moved. It all impressed me: not just the dwarves’ advanced technical skills, but the idea that they’d made something like this just because they wanted to. Perhaps they weren’t just engineers, but artists as well? There was a certain nobility to it all.

Lade looked to be feeling a similar sense of satisfaction.

However...

“How utterly absurd,” Clara griped. “These dwarves sound like strange, sad little creatures.”

“I could not agree more, madam.”

Clara and Reyha didn’t quite seem to appreciate it like we did. They leveled cold stares at both us and the statue alike.

Chapter 16

WE FOLLOWED THE AQUEDUCT, which seemed to stretch on forever. It proved to be a reliable guide, leading us straight to Axeholm.

After we saw that massive, hydro-powered dwarven landmark, I felt like nothing would surprise us...but once we got to the foot of the city, I quickly grew excited thinking about what other wonders we might see.

“Wow...” I craned my neck back.

Lade mirrored my gesture. “Remarkable...”

It was even grander than I expected.

Lade and I looked up at Axeholm, and it left us speechless.

We had seen a rocky mountain at a distance, but that impression wasn't quite right. It would be more accurate to call it a mountain made from stone. As far as the design went... Well, let's just say it reminded me of *The Tower of Babel* as painted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Overall, it was a solid trapezoidal shape divided into perhaps twenty layers.

The issue was the size.

When we got close, we couldn't even see the top of the tower anymore. It seemed to reach the level of the clouds. It must have been at least a hundred meters tall...as big as a modern skyscraper.

The aqueduct went on beyond Axeholm and all the way to the mountain range in the distance.

Ted just stared. “It's huuuge!”

“Whoa,” one of the recruits gasped.

“It's just amazing,” said another.

They were trembling visibly, but all of us felt the same sense of awe.

Well, Pharaoh Khufu's pyramid was over 140 meters tall, right? It wasn't too strange that the dwarves could build something like this. In whatever fantasy novel you cared to read, dwarves tended to have an almost unfair edge as builders.

The soldiers were still going on. “Wow, it's huge! Just absolutely massive!”

I scratched at my chin. “Hmmm...”

To put it bluntly: Men love huge stuff.

Here we all were, standing in awe, like a bunch of junior high students visiting Tokyo for the first time on a field trip. And right there next to everyone else was an abnormally huge man who just so happened to want me dead.

I felt like I was going crazy. “Ha ha...”



Whap! I smacked the back of the lad closest to me. It hurt my hand.

There was silence.

Lade looked down at me, irritated. He might have been giving me that look now, but just a few minutes ago he'd been looking up with shining eyes just like Ted, me, and the others.

I couldn't resist poking fun. "You're a pretty big guy, but not so big next to all this, huh?"

"Shut up..." His face, with its handsome, chiseled features, was stern as always, but I noticed his lips weren't quite as pursed as they usually were.

But we wouldn't become friends that easily, and I was sure he wouldn't forget his mission. *Still, I shouldn't neglect opportunities to find a little bit of human connection.*

The main gate of Axeholm was as massive as everything else, made completely of metal. It was nearly ten meters tall.

Dwarf merchants came and went, their wagons full of stone and finished goods. Soldiers moved along on patrol. Overall, the scene was a lively one. I don't know if it was because of what I'd already heard from Ild, but their stiff expressions and rushed movements concerned me. Considering the size of the gate, the number of merchants seemed small to me.

There was a guard posted in front of the entrance, and when we spoke with him, another dwarf came over to help. He wound up being much friendlier than his intimidatingly heavy armor implied.

"Ahh, so you're Laird Margilus, then! I heard about you from the architects of House Dauron."

"News travels fast," I observed. "Can you let us in?"

"Yes, please wait a minute. I'll give you a certificate plate."

Aside from the guard, a number of officers had also emerged from the station. Each one had some sort of strange tool about the size of a breadbox affixed to their belt.

Certificate plate?

I could sense that I was about to be introduced to another piece of dwarven technology.

"Hrmm, so you are Mister Margilus...and you would be Mister

Ild... And you there? Mister Lade, Lady Clara, and a Miss Reyhanalka...”

Once the officers asked for everyone’s names, they started fiddling with those tools on their belts. Looking closer, I could see they were tapping at a section of the device that looked exactly like typewriter keys.

Click, click, clack!

Each time an officer tapped a key, there was a sound from inside their tools, like a hammer hitting something hard.

We stood silent at first.

“Just what are you doing?” a gruff voice cut in.

While I was trying to stand politely and contain my excitement about what might happen next, Lade was unable to control his own curiosity.

He sure has turned into a chatterbox since we got here.

“Please wait just a moment...There we are, all done.”

“Here you are, Mister Margilus.”

The officer in front of Lade pulled out a metal plate and handed it over. Everyone got their own plate soon after.

I examined mine closely. It was a silvery metallic plate, about the size of standard A5 card stock like we might have used at the office in my old life. Its surface sported bumps and indentations about five millimeters in size worked into some kind of design.

There was also a string run through them so we could put them around our necks.

“Did you use that device of yours to punch this out on a flat sheet?” I wondered.

The officer seemed pleased. “Why, yes, as a matter of fact.”

He explained to us that the markings formed a code that only dwarves could understand. Each of the certificate plates they issued had the name of a guest and their physical characteristics listed on its surface. In effect, they could be used as ID cards.

The list also included special characteristics that only dwarves could recognize (although they wouldn’t tell us what those were), so it would be immediately obvious if someone tried to use a certificate that wasn’t theirs.

Furthermore, it had a credit card-like function, and could be used for machine verification when entering and exiting important

divisions of the city.

Probably these protruding marks were something akin to modern-day Braille or Morse code, and the machines that read their information contained a lock-like mechanism that used specific arrangements as a key. Or at least, that's what I imagined, but I didn't know exactly.

"Man...dwarves really *are* awesome..."

"Yeah..."

Lade and I were totally impressed. We exchanged our certificate plates to check them out while the officers were busy looking down at their tools.

"Ugh... This is what they mean when they say men never grow up," Clara complained.

A certain dark elf actually smirked. "Hah, well..."

"Reyha, make sure you keep an eye on them so they don't wander off or get lost."

"Yes, madam."

The girls didn't seem to appreciate what I assure you was our purely intellectual enthusiasm.

"Well! Color me honored to finally meet the famous Master Margilus I've heard so very much about."

A dwarf man approached us as we were walking toward the massive (are you tired of hearing that word yet?) arch that served as the entrance to Axeholm.

"The name's Feivel. Feivel of the great trading house of Rimron. I have been assigned by the esteemed Governor Zamslon to be your guide."

Feivel was thin and a bit flashily dressed for a dwarf. His glasses slipped down more than once as he introduced himself, obliging him to push them back up.

The Zamslons were the family who ran the politics of Axeholm. The governor was actually equivalent to a king in these parts.

Incidentally, it seemed what he had "heard" about me was that I'd destroyed a daemon nest and taken down daemonists in Relis. In addition, it seemed the dwarves back home had been told about the giants I'd shown Valbo back at Castle Getaeus. Judging by Feivel's

attitude, he didn't seem to completely believe all of it.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," I told him. "Thank you very much for the kind reception."

"Will it be possible to actually meet the governor?" Ild wondered.

Feivel shook his head. "I'm sorry, he has a lot of meetings today... How about first thing tomorrow?"

"Of course," I said. "That will do just fine."

I wanted to stay and rest for at least one night anyway. After I agreed, Ild asked Feivel another question.

"Mister Feivel, would it perhaps be possible for me to speak with Sable and Casas tonight?"

"Hmm." The dwarf considered it for a moment. "Well, we can't exactly deny a request from Ild. We owe you. I will arrange it."

Ild inclined his head gratefully. "I'd be much obliged."

According to Ild, Sable and Casas were key figures in the Zamslon and Rimron families. He probably wanted to lay a foundation for negotiations with their top people. Top dwarves? Anyway, it figured that Ild would think of that... *I really need to start thinking like that, too.*

Ild added, "Oh, also, I would like to discuss something with Valbo's brother Valse."

"Of the architectural house, Dauron? Well, I will do my best to get in contact."

So, Ild had even remembered my idea for instruction to expand the trade route to Filsand. He was probably angling to ask on my behalf if such a project was feasible or not.

Ild would be going out again later, but I decided to have us be shown to our guest rooms first.

"Well then," said Feivel, "welcome to Axeholm."

And that is how we passed through the gate of Axeholm, which sported a complex national emblem known as "the hatchet, hammer, protractor, ruler, and compass."

"My goodness, this one looks amazing, too..."

"As you can see, ma'am, this pendant boasts a three-layer

watermark design...”

A huge tunnel greeted us behind the main gate. The dwarves called it Main Street.

Though Axeholm was a dwarven settlement, high arched ceilings stretched out above us. There were thick, carved pillars lining the avenue and gorgeous shops set to either side. Countless lamps burned brightly, generating plenty of light. Apart from the fact that it was all carved from rock, the spectacle could easily have passed as a modern shopping mall. According to Feivel, the first level of Axeholm was used for interacting with humans, and so it had been built with ample vertical space. It seemed that the important divisions for the dwarves were all located underground. The scale of the entire Axeholm complex was several times larger than what we could see from the surface.

As Feivel had said, there were quite a few humans besides us coming and going. Most were merchants coming from Relis or Filsand.

“Ma’am, look at this hand mirror. Only the most transparent glass affords reflections like these.”

“Oh, you’re right. And the briar design is so detailed and beautiful.”

My first stop was the currency exchange next to the main gate, where I charged my certificate plate with money.

Of course, it wasn’t recorded electronically, but the amount of coins that I’d left at the exchange post got punched into my plate. Every time a purchase was made, either one of the currency exchange posts or the presiding merchant corrected the balance on the certificate plate. All bills were settled and charges made final when you left Axeholm.

However, I might already be at risk of using up my entire deposit...

“My, look at *this* necklace,” Clara said. “Every individual pearl is engraved with the symbol of one of the Eight Pillar Gods... All I can do is sigh.”

Reyha examined it closely. “How is it that dwarves can do such intricate work when they possess such stubby fingers?”

Main Street was wide enough that four horse carriages could run along its length side-by-side. There were countless products on display at the shops that lined both sides of the street. The biggest crowds of people were in front of the jewelry and accessory shops...and the most excited-looking customers of all were the two beauties from Castle Getaeus.

With everything on my plate—Epicenters, the allies we'd left behind at Castle Getaeus, the pending negotiations with the dwarves—there was something heartwarming about such a normal sight.

"Reyha," Clara wondered, "do you think this hair ornament is a little too old-fashioned?"

"Not at all, madam. A classic, traditional design like that suits you perfectly."

Things went on like this for almost a whole hour.

Lade had finally run out of patience. "Hey." He nudged me with his enormous hand. "Don't you think it's high time for us to move on?"

"Well, my good friend." I gestured magnanimously. "Since you're so concerned about our schedule, I'll leave this important task to you."

Lade sneered. "Don't screw around with me. They're your women, aren't they?"

"It's not like that," I said quickly. "If you keep talking like that, people will get the wrong idea."

He nudged me again—even his gentle push was hard enough that I had to brace myself to stand my ground.

Lade might have acted tough, but just like me, he feared the wrath of a woman interrupted. *You know...for some reason, ever since we got here, I've started to feel a little bit friendlier toward him.*

Ild heard our little verbal skirmish and slipped over to whisper. "Master Margilus, I've spotted some humans with curious equipment. I've got a suspicion they're Filsand knights or soldiers."

I glanced over. "Eh?"

The men Ild had subtly pointed out sported white turbans and capes. They definitely looked different from the merchants we normally saw in Relis City or Yulei Village. Several of their number looked to be men-at-arms, and their shields and armor were engraved with a star-and-sword motif. According to Ild, this emblem was the Filsandian coat of arms.

While I spent a moment eyeing the Filsanders, Clara and the others returned. After all that fuss, they hadn't even bought anything.

Clara was definitely in high spirits regardless. "It's been far too long since I've been able to enjoy such luxury... Hey, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," I assured her. "I think it's time for us to be off to our guest rooms."

“Yes, follow me, then.” Feivel had been watching the girls calmly all the while, like this kind of delay was an everyday part of doing business. As soon as I made my request, he started walking ahead.

When I made to follow him, Reyha came up close and whispered in my ear. “My lord. At the next opportunity, why don’t you purchase a beautiful gift for the madam? I am quite certain we were both waiting for you to step in and do so.”

I keep telling everyone, it’s not like that...!

“Wow,” I said. “Look at all this...”

“As fine a sight as all the rest,” Ild agreed.

As we followed Feivel down the wide street, we couldn’t help but look around at everything in awe.

At the end of Main Street was a huge hall that reminded me of a baseball stadium in size. There were several light sources on the ceiling and the walls. Most striking were the towering pillars in the center of the hall. They looked to be about ten meters in diameter. The pillars glittered the green of emeralds, and elaborate branches extended out from the tops of the pillars, interweaving across the ceiling out toward the walls. It felt like walking underneath a bower made from stone.

The illumination of countless lights reflected off the gleaming pillars, bathing the hall in a dreamlike glow.

As Feivel calmly proceeded onward, it became apparent that the pillars were shaped from some kind of green, crystalline metal. Entrances had been hollowed into the bottoms of the pillars, and inside of them we could see clear boxes that looked like they were made of crystal or glass. They moved up and down the pillar’s entire length.

Clara peered upward. “What...is all this?”

“Perhaps some sort of art installation?” Reyha suggested.

The two of them seemed to have warmed up a bit toward dwarves, but I suddenly had a bad feeling. “Wait, are these elevators...? Er, they *are* elevators, aren’t they?”

“As perceptive as I’d heard,” Feivel said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “That’s exactly right,” he went on proudly. “They were just finished recently. All of your guestrooms are on the second level, so

let's travel by this novel method, shall we?

"The boxes inside those pillars move up and down via hydraulic power. They are set up to stop at the first and second level for twenty full seconds each, so please time your disembarkation accordingly."

I moved on in. "Whoa..."

This machine wasn't quite as complicated as modern-day Japanese elevators. It seemed like all they did was move up and down at intervals.

The Dauron dwarves had also used something similar to elevators in their construction work, but I was completely astonished at the hydraulic movement. I don't know how many more times I can say it, but dwarves really are awesome.

Clara and Reyha were also in awe of this luxurious, high-tech mechanism.

"And what is this metal it's made from?" the sorceress wondered.

"I'm glad you asked! This is the real secret of Axeholm: mirsdine!"

"Oho," I said. "Is it a kind of mithril?"

"No, no," Feivel insisted. "This is mirsdine. Entirely different."

Mirsdine seemed to be a magical steel that only dwarves could wield. When the magical ore maleithrilin was mixed into an alloy, it could impart magical properties to any number of metals.

"Maleithrilin and mirsdine are important products of Axeholm," Ild explained with a bitter smile. "They can also be used as magical materials, but humans aren't easily able to make use of them. Just one of these pillars would be valuable enough to purchase an entire castle out in the realms of men."

I immediately knew what he was getting at. If we could trade in maleithrilin and mirsdine, we'd make a pile of money.

The elevators fit no more than three humans at a time, so I stepped into one of the crystal lifts with Clara and Reyha.

There weren't any buttons to be pushed, so after we stood waiting for a bit, the box started floating up with an inelegant thud.

"Eep!"

"Whoa." Even though I'd been expecting some impact, it was more than I'd anticipated. I had to brace myself with my staff.

It had been a long time since I'd enjoyed the unique sensation of

floating up into the air. Just at that moment, as I was wobbling on my foot, I bumped into something soft.

“Oops! Are you okay?” Clara had lost her balance, and now she was clinging to my arm for support. The sense of a large, supple mass touching my arm was enough to get even this old man a little excited.

Still, as I tried to keep my balance, I couldn’t help but notice Reyha approaching.

“My lord!” She reached out her arm to help hold me up—or at least, I thought that’s what she meant to do.

But instead, she pushed Clara from behind, causing the two of us to smoosh that little bit closer together. All just an accident. Supposedly.

“Gah!” Clara complained. “Wait a—”

“Ow!” With the growing pressure of all that softness pushed up against me, I couldn’t keep it together. I wound up teetering and falling right onto my backside.

And of course, Clara’s perfectly shaped body wound up following me all the way down.

“M-Margilus, I-I’m terribly sorry—”

Reyha spoke dutifully. “Please accept the humblest of apologies from your servant, my lord.”

Clara looked genuinely embarrassed, but I couldn’t help detecting a certain sly satisfaction on Reyha’s face. I’m not sure just what she thought she was doing, but...it wasn’t worth getting worked up about. I was sure even someone as stoic as Reyha had a mischievous side. If she’d had even an ounce of suspicion that danger might be at hand, she never would have done something like this.

And I’ll be honest. Speaking as a man: I didn’t mind one bit.

As I began to share a private grin with Reyha...

We all suddenly fell quiet.

There was a young girl standing at the entrance of the elevator. In a word, she was beautiful.

To be more specific, she sported rich golden pigtails and a short but gorgeous dress. Her eyes were an arresting shade of crimson. She looked like she might have been in junior high back on Earth, or maybe just barely old enough for high school. In one hand, she held an intricately designed staff that sparkled with a silvery gleam.

I’d just fallen flat on my butt—while gripping Clara with one arm—right in front of this girl. *Nice. Really smooth move.*

She stepped aside, looking down upon us with her angelic face. Her red eyes were totally unamused. Upon closer inspection, there were a number of people who looked like guards behind her, and they moved to the side as soon as she did. The unspoken hint was clear: Get the hell off.

"I'm terribly sorry about this," Clara sputtered. She got up in an awful hurry.

"P-please excuse us," I added, following suit.

"It is of no consequence," said the girl.

We hustled out of the elevator double-time. I'm sure we looked like the kind of hopeless couple you might see at an amusement park.

The girl gave us a practiced smile, curtsying before she passed us to board the elevator.

As the lift departed, I noticed the emblem upon her staff: a familiar star and sword.

"Wow! You have *hot springs*?" I could hardly contain myself.

Feivel, meanwhile, remained perfectly composed. "Yes, we do indeed have our very own thermal bath."

We'd been shown to the guest quarters on the second floor of Axeholm. Feivel had taken the opportunity to recommend a few of the city's luxuries.

"There is an excellent public bath in the underground levels. Naturally, our human guests are also welcome to use it."

"That's great," I said. "We definitely have to go."

It was nice to soak alone in the tub on the rooftop of Castle Getaeus, but Japanese people absolutely need to get some time in a large, proper bath. And hot springs are even better. Coming in from the trail, I hadn't had a chance to properly clean myself for days. I could really use a chance to refresh.

"How about it?" I pressed. "Why don't you all go ahead and get ready?"

"I'm quite all right..."

I'd already taken a towel and a change of clothes out of my Infinity Bag, but my friends weren't nearly so eager.

"In a communal bath, everyone gets in the tub *together*, right...?"

Clara shook her head. "I'd be far too embarrassed..."

Ild likewise grimaced. "Immersing your whole body in hot water? Dangerous business."

I was astonished to hear their words. *These two are supposed to be the ones with common sense! They're supposed to be cultured!*

"What's there to be embarrassed by?" I turned to Feivel. "Just to be sure, men and women bathe separately, correct?"

"Of course!"

A smile appeared involuntarily upon my face. "See?"

"See what, exactly?" Clara huffed. "It doesn't make things any less troublesome just because I'd only be with other women."

They weren't getting it. What was the Sedian equivalent to "when in Rome"?

"Well," Ted hedged, "one time, when I was completely exhausted, I used the public bath at Relis. I have to admit, it felt pretty good."

"It's not as if you'd be completely naked," Feivel pointed out. "We have bathrobes sized for humans."

All three of us joined forces to try and convince them, but it didn't seem to be working.

Everyone in Sedia took the occasional cold shower, and regularly scrubbed their bodies with a washcloth, so it wasn't like they were filthy. But I felt a deep-seated need to share the joy of a Japanese bath. Call me crazy, but I felt like it was a kind of mission for me.

"All right, I've got it!" I held up a finger. "If everyone here tries the bath and walks away unsatisfied, then I will grant them one favor, no questions asked! I swear it on my good name as a wizard!"

When I think about it now, it was awfully immature of me. What a pathetic thing to risk my wizardly reputation over. But I can't deny it worked. My friends begrudgingly agreed to try the hot spring. Granted, the looks on their faces made it clear that it was more from me being relentless than because they were excited about maybe winning a favor.

Axeholm's corridors stretched out deep underground, and the baths were a sight to behold.

The massive bathing hall boasted a number of tubs made of

stone. Steam spewed forth from statues of dragons and other monsters that I didn't really recognize, and the air was filled with hot, misty vapor. I could tell that sticks of incense were burning here and there, adding a subtly sweet smell to the air.

Though we were underground, the high ceilings sparkled and glimmered in a way that reminded me of a planetarium.

"Ahhh..."

I let out a deep, pleasant breath as I sank down into a huge bath. It must have been at least as large as the pool we'd had at my elementary school.

Before finally arriving at this tub, I'd already thoroughly enjoyed a steam bath and scrub-down. Relaxing in hot water, I felt like I was absorbing the energy of the hot spring straight into my pores. I put my head on the edge of the bath and let my body float, allowing the exhaustion in every corner of my body to melt away into the water.

This was the best. God bless every dwarf.

"Ahhh... I'm sorry, Geo!" Ild spoke loudly off to my right, mimicking the way I'd sunk into the bath. "I was more ignorant than I could have known!"

Told you so, I thought smugly.

Feeling better and better, I turned in the water.

We both fell silent.

In the center of the bath was a giant mass of muscle: Lade, sitting cross-legged. He was so big that the water only came up to his hips. Sweat dripped from his scarred, tattooed body; his eyes were tightly shut, and a grumpy frown lingered on his face.

"Try to relax," I told him. "Even if I am a daemon, I promise not to do anything bad until we get out of the hot springs."

He didn't answer.

Well, I tried to be friendly, but Lade stayed dead silent. We'd started talking a little more freely since arriving at Axeholm, but it was hard to see this as anything other than getting the cold shoulder.

Sure, we both had roles to fill, but everybody here was unarmed and naked. He could maybe afford to let his guard down just a little bit.

"Lade, let me be honest with you. You warriors are really amazing."

He didn't speak, but he perked up a bit.

I'd heard a few more stories about the warriors since meeting them. Their entire clan lived to fulfill their mission. Everything they did was in the name of hunting daemons... I had to admire such a fierce way of life.

From their perspective, I was just some kid who had only recently taken up the cause.

Their methods involved staying apart from society in order to freely hunt daemonists—the complete opposite of my own style. But that was precisely why I respected them. They followed a path I never could have walked.

“Or at least, that’s what I think.” I exhaled wearily.

He still didn’t answer.

As much respect as I had for them, I was concerned about the fear everyone held for them. Perhaps because the possibility of someone finding daemonists in their midst hit too close to home.

So I decided to speak to him just a little bit more, while the two of us were here sharing the same experience.

“Hey, Lade. The warriors spend their whole lives fighting in order to destroy the daemons, but...there are a lot of humans whose lives were saved thanks to you, right? I bet those people feel really grateful to you.”

“Shut your mouth, wizard.”

When Lade spoke, I heard a splash up above me. Hot water pattered down over us. The big brute was washing his face. I resolved to try and teach him a bit about proper bathing etiquette the next time we found ourselves in this situation.

“Though...” he admitted begrudgingly, “I did hear from an elder once that hot springs are good for your health...”

He kept on grumbling away, but he was relaxing there in the water, same as me.

“To begin,” Reyha instructed, “we take a while to sweat it out in this sauna.”

“Right,” Clara said hesitantly.

Clara and Reyha were in the women’s baths. They both wore skimpy bathrobes and had elegantly tied up their lengthy hair.

Reyha had already thoroughly checked the baths to make sure

there were no hidden assassins or traps. The smiling dwarf woman serving as their attendant put up with all their peculiarities, but even she balked for a moment at that inspection.

“Ah...do forgive us,” Clara said gently.

Truth be told, Clara was easily capable of using her sorcery a few times even without her staff, and Reyha could fight off about ten average combatants without any weapons.

While she was still a little taken aback by the foreignness of dwarven customs, Clara followed Reyha’s instructions and gracefully took her first step into the sauna. They were welcomed by a white wall of steam and all its accompanying warmth.

In the semi-cylindrical sauna, they found a line of beds made from ceramic tile. At the urging of their dwarf attendant, they both lay down inside.

“Oh...this really is...warm and comfortable.”

“Yes,” Reyha agreed. “It would seem the incense has a certain calming effect as well.”

Even the floor and beds were heated from underneath. The two women warmed their bodies and immersed themselves in the moisturizing steam. With every inward breath, the steam warmed their bodies that little bit more. With every exhalation, all the toxins and impurities of the body melted away.

The two of them literally breathed new life into their beautiful skin, one woman milk-white and the other brown. The scene would have caught the eye of any red-blooded human, be they man or woman. However, most of the baths’ patrons were dwarves, and while there were some elves present, there weren’t many humans.

One dwarf youth looked to the older dwarf beside her. “Those humans sure look like they’re enjoying themselves, don’t they, mom?”

“From what I’ve heard, the elven and human towns don’t have any hot springs of their own. I do hope they enjoy themselves while they’re here.”

As a people, dwarf women tended to be plump and stout. Although their standards for beauty were different from humans’, they gazed warmly at Clara and Reyha.

“Here is your tea,” the attendant told them. “This ought to help you sweat it all out.”

“Thank you,” Clara said. “Oh my, it’s delicious.”

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?” The dwarf attendant smiled. “This

particular tea is brewed with a number of special herbs.”

The chilled herbal tea they were served refreshed their reddened bodies. The liquid circulated swiftly through their body, to be distributed again as sweat.

Clara sighed. “It’s like my exhaustion is melting away...”

“Just so, madam. I must say...I completely misunderstood what taking a bath could be.”

Clara and Reyha drowsily let their skin absorb the steam, half-asleep. Then, two female dwarves appeared with large towels.

“You have sweat well. Are you ready for your scrub?”

“Up we go now. Pardon me, pardon me...”

“Huh?!” Clara squawked.

Without waiting for permission, the well-built dwarves got on top of the women and pulled down their robes.

“Hey!” Clara’s eyes widened. “What’s this about?!”

Even Reyha lost her composure. “Ah...! Wait! What is this?!”

Both of them felt embarrassed by how easily women with no combat experience restrained them. But the real embarrassment was yet to come.

“I do love working on human backs,” the one attendant told the other. “They’re so broad.”

“Best we get started, eh? Heave-ho!”

“Bwuh?! Hey! Eep!”

No one in the world had ever made Clara Andell squeal like this before.

The dwarf woman was a master scrubber. She proceeded to scour every speck of dirt from Clara’s damp, white back, wielding her washcloth like a deadly weapon.

Clara was the daughter of a count, and having an attendant towel her down after a cold shower had been a daily occurrence for her. However, this was her first experience with getting scrubbed and exfoliated by a professional.

“What a lively reaction, Miss! Your skin’s lovely, but it’s awfully white, don’t you know. Any dirt would really stand out.”

“Dirt?” Clara’s eyes widened. “How rude—gwuh?! ”

Let’s just leave out the details of how much grime Clara had built up on the road. For her sake.

“Guuuh... Reyha...”

Clara realized she was actually enjoying the sensation of being so thorough scrubbed. There was a certain pleasure in feeling all the dirt being scraped away from her back, shoulders, and sides. Finally, she turned her head and looked beside her.

“Oh, lord...”

Reyha was descended from the High Curvus, a name synonymous with fear in the underworld. This fearsome assassin, a woman who had inherited terrifying skill and power through her very blood, was now adrift in a cloud of pleasure.

I'll say it nicely for Reyha's sake, too, but if those attendants had possessed even an ounce of desire to kill, she would have been dead in a second. In that state, she looked like nothing more than a gelatinous mass draped across the platform. She had completely let her guard down.

“We definitely couldn't do this if Lord Margilus was around,” she all but purred, laughing.

Clara spoke quietly. “We really were wrong about hot springs, weren't we...?”

“Yes, madam... I had no idea.”

After being scrubbed clean, and feeling refreshed, they moved to the bathing chamber.

There were five baths, each a different color, and the bathhouse demanded that its guests use them in a specific order. Clara and Reyha eventually were soaking in a bath with floating rose petals.

“There's no way we could go back and say we weren't satisfied, is there?”

“I-I think you're right.”

“Margilus really knew what he was talking about...” Clara muttered.

Each of the five baths was adorned with an impressive statue. For whatever reason, the rose bath featured a statue of some sort of insectoid creature pouring out a jug of liquor. Hot water poured continuously from the lip of the jug.

Sitting on a bench hidden under the water, Clara stretched out her long legs, crossing them at the knee.

“I’m sure the lord would listen to anything his lady has to say, madam.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “This again.” Objectively, Reyha wasn’t wrong, but Clara shook her head. “First of all, I am not his wife.”

“I can but observe the norms of human society as an outsider, and from my point of view, you clearly have a marriage relationship.”

Clara shook her head firmly. “Ugh! You’re always going on and on about this.” She let her body sink deeper, soaking up to her shoulders.

There was silence.

Clara surrendered her body to the bath and closed her eyes. She asked herself: What was Geo Margilus to her?

Well, I admit he is not entirely displeasing to look upon.

It looked like she was staring absentmindedly into space, but she imagined Margilus’s face. Black hair and dark eyes were rare in the Ryuse region, but by no means unheard of.

A gentle expression appeared on her face. *His power as magic user and wizard...it’s unprecedented.*

It wasn’t just his magic that set him apart. As far as such things were reckoned in Sedia, Clara was fairly distinguished as a combat sorcerer. She actually understood the uniqueness and danger of Margilus’s powers better than he did.

What’s most remarkable is that even with all that power, he’s never once used it for personal gain. It’s wonderfully noble of him.



What would she do if she had the same magical powers that Margilus had...? At first, she'd been jealous, but now she shuddered to recall that attitude.

Any time she set her eyes upon hard-headed nobles, obstinate council members, or even some savage drunkard, she wanted to shoot them dead with a flaming arrow. Realistically, Margilus had enough power to get everything he wanted, even if the entire world stood against him. She wasn't sure how hard it was for him to balance temptation and responsibility, but it was frightening just to think about it.

He still has a long way to go before he could serve as any kind of mentor... But it's admirable how he accepts people at their word without any hesitation.

Clara had seen one too many humans whose nobility or sorcery had made them arrogant. And she knew that arrogance was also her own personality flaw (to a certain extent, anyway).

Compared to all that conceit, the way Margilus trusted and valued the opinions of others seemed far nobler. However, it was a problem if he let that get in the way of making important decisions as a leader.

That he would take it upon himself to try and protect the entire world from daemons is surprising in and of itself. Of course, it was me who advised him to become a hero...

Clara frowned as she floated in the bath, staring at the beautiful lights and carvings on the ceiling.

No matter how iron an hand you could govern yourself with as a "magic user," it seemed dangerous to try take responsibility for the entire world. She thought it would be better if he relaxed a bit.

Actually, Margilus had removed his wizardly accoutrements and was relaxing somewhere nearby right at that very moment. When Clara remembered that, she felt both relieved and stunned.

Overall...he is a person who deserves deep respect. But what do I think of him as a man...?

Clara frowned.

She wasn't so young as to be naive in matters of love and romance. But as part of the Sedian elite, both socially and in ability, it wasn't easy to find a man who was her equal.

In her opinion, Heridol of the Sorcerers' Guild and their party leader Sedam were her equals, but they were both married already. She was especially friendly with Sedam, but the respect she felt for

him was more the kind owed to a brother.

Her silence continued.

The fact was that Margilus had saved her life. When she wavered as a sorceress, he always had the right words to calm her down. Even when she screamed at him or pushed him around, he always just gave her a smile and a shrug. He was actually bringing a world that she had only dreamed about into reality, one step at a time.

“Madam,” Reyha spoke up. “I may not be human, but I do know that there is no logic in matters of love. Please, try to feel the truth with your heart instead of trying to reason it out with your mind.”

“With my heart, hmh...”

Clara put both hands to her chest and closed her eyes. She thought about Margilus’s relaxed, unguarded face. He was annoying sometimes, but he was sweet to her.

The water started to bubble.

“M-ma’am?!”

It was like something inside her heart boiled. She sank deeper into the bath, as if in denial.

“Whatever are the two of them getting on about...? They really are noisy, aren’t they, Princess?”

Next to the rose bath was the scented wood bath, where sweet-smelling shavings floated in the water. Its occupants considered the two foreigners, Clara and Reyha.

“It’s probably their first time in a hot spring,” said the girl addressed as “Princess.” She smiled at her quite ordinary-looking companion. “I understand. It really does feel good.”

The princess’s skin was white. She had golden blonde hair. She looked delicate overall, but she had curves in all the right places. If Clara and Reyha had been paying attention through the steam, they would have realized that she was the same girl they’d crossed paths with in the elevator before.

“Yes, it really does feel amazing...”

The girl blinked her eyes as she floated in the water. What a curse it was: Even these relaxing waters could not warm her heart.

“I heard there’s an ice room at Axeholm where you can drink chilled beer,” I told everyone conspiratorially.

Ted and the recruits perked up immediately. “Ooh, amazing!”

“Man, I sure am glad I became a soldier...”

“Mmm...”

After soaking in the hot baths and absorbing the energy of the hot springs, we were waiting at the entrance to the largest bath.

When I’d told the others about some of the services that Feivel had recommended, Ted, the new recruits, and even Lade had nodded enthusiastically. Well, who wouldn’t have?

“Once the ladies join us, let’s stop by the bar, shall we?”
I suggested.

Ild shook his head. “Unfortunately, I won’t be joining you. I need to go meet with those dwarves I mentioned.”

“Oh... Right, sorry,” I said. “We can always go to the bar together later.”

Ild looked a bit regretful that he’d miss out. We waited for Clara and Reyha in the path of a cool breeze (supposedly coming from a fan somewhere), which felt rather nice on our warm skin after the bath.

I was quiet.

They were quiet.

The girls really were taking a long time. What had started as a refreshing breeze started to feel pretty cold. Lade wore a bitter look on his face. Ted and the others were lying on the floor.

I was quiet.

They were quiet.

“What a strange experience!”

Just when we were getting hungry and losing patience, we finally heard two cheerful voices.

“Perhaps we might build something like this at the castle as well?”

I frowned. “Hey, you’re la—”

“Margilus!” Clara waved. “You were right! Hot springs really are wonderful!”

“I wonder if the legendary bed of the abyss of darkness is a place like that...”

I started to complain, but when I saw the refreshed and

lustrously smooth Clara and Reyha, I stopped short.

Clara's pure white skin was flushed, and her glossy hair was tied up high on her head. Her pajamas were partially unbuttoned down her chest. In a word, she looked sexy.

Reyha's dark brown skin gleamed almost to a mirror sheen, and her eyes had softened from their usual militant, lupine sharpness. She looked just as appealing as Clara.

"Each bath had different medicinal effects, and we had to soak in them in order," Clara was saying. "It was truly fascinating! It was so steamy—like being inside a cloud! And I've never had such a thorough and skillful massage in all my life!"

"Yes, apparently the dwarves make oils from tree roots and minerals," said Reya. "The fragrances were wonderful. It was like they were absorbed right into our skin."

I'd never seen these two so excited. And the women's bath had aestheticians?

"See? Look. People already say my skin's as white as snow, but now it's even whiter!" Clara thrust the back of her hand toward me. She never smiled this much. But she really was beautiful. I've heard that white skin blemishes easily, but hers was smooth and fresh.

"Yeah, in my hometown, silky-smooth skin and..."

Normally I wouldn't react this way, but since she was holding it out to show me, I moved my face closer.

"Look here, too!" she exclaimed. "Even my elbow is smooth as silk!"

"Wow," I said, trying to sound suitably impressed. She'd thrust her round, shiny elbow in front of my face while I was still trying to get a good look at the back of her hand. For a second I thought she was going in for an elbow strike, but any fear I might have had in that regard melted away in the face of her gorgeous smile.

"Y-yes," I stammered. "You're right. Beautiful."

She did her best to get a look at her own elbow. "I never would have imagined that they'd try and soften out my hardened skin with a file..."

It's not like I'd studied what her elbow had looked like before, but even I knew enough to realize that Clara was looking for praise.

Her flushed skin slowly turned whiter and whiter as the effects of the heat receded. Damn. This was a problem.

Clara was oblivious to my distress. "Oh! I heard there's a shop

over there that does nails and hair. Let's go, Reyha!"

"Madam? Oh my, do wait a moment!"

Clara darted off without a second thought, and Reyha rushed to keep up with her.

After the cheerful storm had passed, only the men remained, struck speechless by all the excitement.

"Well, well, wizard. Color me impressed. It seems your women could grow even more beautiful, after all. They've completely forgotten about the favor you promised..."

Lade only got chatty when he found something to make fun of me about.

Chapter 17

THAT NIGHT, I called Reyha to my room. Not for anything inappropriate, mind you. I wanted her to find out more about the worrying atmosphere at Axeholm.

Reyha was happy to hear my request and immediately set out to investigate. She returned less than an hour later to report on what she'd heard.

"I'm very sorry, my lord. The doors to all of the important sections of Axeholm require certificate plates to enter. There are too many restrictions for me to be able to properly use my skills."

While I tried to reassure Reyha—who looked depressed about the whole thing—I felt both disappointment and excitement. It was unfortunate that we didn't have any new information, but this was proof that the dwarves of Sedia had technology that at least rivaled Reyha, a Level 20 thief.

They would be fearsome enemies, but they would be extremely useful as allies.

"If you can give me but another day or two, I will begin my quest to find a way to move freely within Axeholm!"

Our first night in Axeholm ended with a strange wave of motivation coming over Reyha.

The next day, we began discussions with Garde, head of the governing house of Zamslon. This made him, for all intents and purposes, the ruler of the dwarves.

The setting was the underground levels of Axeholm. Specifically, a massive conference hall. Though, it was so big it might have been better to call it a conference stadium. A huge table was set up on a round platform in the center of the room to accommodate attendees, and there was stadium seating for onlookers set up around that. I don't know much about such things, but judging from the sheets hanging from the ceiling, and the various shapes worked into the walls, it seemed attention had also been given to the acoustics.

The massive table was lined with dwarves who belonged to House Zamslon. I sat in the center seat opposite them. I figured the dwarf with the strange crown on his head was Garde. His face was

quite wrinkled, and his hair was completely white. He was the picture of a dwarf leader. Intimidating, to say the least.

“The time is 5-5-4-3-2,” sounded an announcement. I couldn’t tell where it was coming from. “The meeting with Lord Margilus of Castle Getaeus will now commence. The most senior official in attendance is Governor Garde Zamslon XI of House Zamslon. He is assisted by Sable Zamslon VIII and Casas Rimron V. Taking the minutes is Secretary Cowell Handron IX.”

While the announcement sounded, a dwarf positioned in the corner of the table started furiously operating a machine. He was typing on something that looked like a keyboard, probably taking the minutes.

Incidentally, the “paper” set in the machine was a thin sheet of metal. It seemed dwarves didn’t really use paper.

“Mister Margilus,” said the old dwarf. “Regarding the issue of trade arrangements with your castle, we would be happy to oblige.” His wrinkles stretched congenially as he smiled. Garde looked like a sly old dwarf. I wagered he must have learned a few tricks in his day. The quick response was probably thanks to the groundwork Ild had laid the day before.

“That is wonderful news,” I told him. “I believe our castle a natural and excellent partner for Axeholm.”

I did my best to sit up tall and look important as I answered. I glanced at the daughter of nobility seated beside me, and she nodded slightly. The crash course in dwarven etiquette Clara had given me the night before was already paying off.

Garde stroked his chin. “Regarding construction of the highway... Well, it clearly has Valbo’s approval, so I do not foresee any problems. Once it is complete, it can be used as a main route of trade.”

So, it seemed House Dauron did have significant authority. Still, Garde’s voice didn’t seem quite as pleased with the highway construction.

“And your final proposal is...an anti-daemon alliance. Well, it is undeniable that we at Axeholm are aware of the serious threat that daemons pose. If there are ways in which we can cooperate with each other, then that would be ideal.”

Cooperate. I was so grateful for those words that I wanted to cry, but when I tried to read the tone and expression on Garde’s face, he didn’t seem pleased.

“That is a wise decision,” I said. “Shall we leave the precise details for coordinating both trade and alliance to the practitioners?”

“That sounds fine.” Garde raised a hand, prompting his assistants to signal the staff waiting along the wall of the conference room. Maybe they would play a closing announcement...

“Oh, wait just a moment,” I cut in. “I’m very sorry to break from schedule, but I hope you might allow me to make one more proposal here. I think it would be extremely profitable for Axeholm.”

“Is that so? And what would that proposal be?”

I’m sure the word “profitable” caught his attention. Garde seemed willing to listen, and his assistants hurriedly gave the staff new instructions. The secretary resumed his furious typing.

This was the crucial moment.

“I hear that Axeholm is also trading with Filsand, but that there is no well-maintained trade route between your realms. If the dwarf people lend their assent, I would like to help establish a safe trade route to Filsand as well.”

“Mmn...” Garde was skeptical. “And how exactly do you propose to establish such a trade route? To the east is the Iron Fan mountain range. To the north are the Twilight Wastelands.”

I smiled. “I think we should dig a tunnel straight through the Iron Fans.”

“What?!”

My proposal had plenty of impact. Garde and the other dwarves started whispering angrily among themselves. I could hear words like “stupid” and “idiotic.” Well, even a species as advanced as the dwarves of Axeholm wouldn’t normally think of tunneling through a mountain range.

Last night, Ild had already spent time in secret discussions with dwarves of House Dauron in order to judge the feasibility of the proposal. Of course, all the discussions assumed access to my magic, the details of which were met with some skepticism.

“There is no profit for us in that,” Garde objected. “That much construction would take hundreds of years, even if we allotted all our dwarfpower. Even using giants wouldn’t make much difference. You would not live to see the project’s end.”

Garde gave his explanation gently, with a measured calm that reflected his age and wisdom.

But the time for reasonable economics and sober statecraft had

ended. This was an age of magic users.

The day after the meeting, I found myself in the plains outside of Axeholm with a number of influential dwarves.

“Now, convince me, sorcerer. If you can.”

“I’m a wizard, actually. But yes, let’s get straight to it.”

The rocky wilderness outside the city was not suitable for agriculture, and there were strange structures dotted everywhere. As expected, we could also see the bizarre giant dwarf statue.

What were we doing in these rugged plains?

“Now I will show you how we can tunnel through the Iron Fan mountain range.”

That’s right. In order to establish safe passage to Filsand, we needed to dig a long tunnel through the Iron Fan mountain range, located to the east of Axeholm. I had asked for an audience in order to present how this task, deemed practically impossible by the Zamslon dwarves, could be achieved through magic.

I mean, they didn’t look happy about it, but here we were. Fortunately, Ild had already gained the trust of Axeholm.

“Open, Gate of Magic.”

As usual, I passed through the magical gate to my inner world and descended the spiral staircase to the eighth level.

I touched the charged spells that slumbered atop the bookrests of the spellbook archive and imagined the most terribly huge, useful monster I could—then projected that thought out into the chaotic realm.

“As a consequence of this spell, I will create one digdag worm in this space under my command for a duration of one hour. *Create Monster: Special.*”

As always, the air in front of me distorted. The distortion was even greater than when I’d called up the forest giants. It took up my entire field of vision, making me dizzy.

The silhouette of the thing created by the magic was also different from the giants. The long, strange shape started to gain more and more form and texture.

“Woow!!” one of the dwarves exclaimed.

“What is that?!”

“A monster!”

Even Clara was taken aback. “Wow... P-please, Margilus, don’t make such strange things appear without warning me first!”

Their shock was to be expected. My spell created a gigantic worm some thirty meters long and three meters in diameter.

The beast made a quavering noise. “Shooo...”

“Hmmm... It certainly is disgusting,” I muttered.

I’d used this monster a lot in *D&B*, but I’d never actually seen one with my own eyes until now. The green surface of its flesh glistened with moisture; its huge, squirming body was positively disgusting.

“S-so,” Garde said, looking faintly nauseous. “This is your sorcery—or rather, wizardry? But how will this help...?”

“You’ll see,” I assured him. I had to hold back a bit of nausea of my own. *Now, digdag worm. Show us what you can do!*

I communicated with the worm telepathically, and it immediately got to work.

It lifted its head high in the air, as if stretching, and when it began to curve back down, we could see its round, open maw. *Yuck.*

The worm slammed its head forcefully into the ground.

Thoom!

The impact felt like the hammer of a giant god had fallen from the sky, and we could hear a crushing, grinding sound.

The worm thrust itself into the ground, and the rest of its body twisted...gradually working its head further into the earth.

One of the dwarves realized what was happening. “Hey, can this thing really...?”

“That’s right,” I said. “This worm can eat through rock and dirt. It’s an excellent digger.” As I explained, the thirty-meter body of the worm started disappearing into the ground, as if swallowed up by stone. It was probably only about five minutes more before the tail and its poisonous spike vanished into the earth.

“I can’t believe it can dig so fast...”

“How far will it go?”

“It’s disappeared...”

Curious, the dwarves immediately peered over the rim of the

hole where the worm had burrowed.

“Hmm?” A dwarf from House Dauron examined the hole’s edges with widened eyes. “What is this substance that’s solidified the tunnel walls?”

Just as he said, the walls of the three-meter-wide tunnel had been coated with a gray, concrete-like material.

“How can I explain this...? The worm’s...secretions...are generated from the consumption of dirt and rock, and exuded from the worm’s body to help reinforce the paths it digs. Luckily, it’s possible to control whether or not these secretions are applied.”

“Ohh... Well, this is more than satisfactory,” said one dwarf.

“Aye,” said another. “If we’re going to tunnel through the mountain, then strength will certainly be an issue.”

I’m sure you understand what I was getting at: We were building better tunnels through the power of worm poop. I’d explained in a voice that I hoped was quiet enough for the girls not to overhear. The dwarves, at least, were very receptive.

Once he’d confirmed that the digdag worm could work, and indeed could dig up to five meters without stopping, Garde bowed to me with respect. “Margilus, please forgive me for doubting you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s probably your first time seeing this kind of magic. It’s only natural to have doubts.”

“I appreciate your understanding...”

“So, if you’d indulge me, I’d love to show you a few more tricks this old wizard can do.”

“Huh?!”

After that, I used my *Create Monster* spells to create ogres, giants, and even dragons. I also generated stone and iron walls and moved the land in all directions. I used everything I could to awe and impress the dwarves.

I’d taken the advice Clara had given me to heart, and had decided to go all out. To be honest, if I’d held back at all, I didn’t think I could have offered anything to these dwarves, given their massive economic and technological strengths.

After the hour-long magic exhibition was complete, Garde shouted with excitement. “Your magic is absolutely amazing, Mister

Margilus! Tell me, then! All the rumors were true?! Even dropping stones and turning people to pigs...?"

"Well, more or less, yes."

Garde clenched a fist. "Mister Margilus, Axeholm will form a friendship with you stronger than mirsdine!"

"I am most pleased to hear it," I told him. "So then, about the trade route with Filsand..."

"Oh, yes. We have certainly confirmed here that it is possible to dig a tunnel. However..." Garde trailed off, hanging his head.

Naturally there was still the problem of whether or not Filsand would agree. Perhaps the duke wasn't very trustworthy? I then remembered the issue of the strange atmosphere at Axeholm. Would that come up now?

"Mister Margilus!" The old dwarf suddenly snapped open his eyes, which had been buried in his wrinkles. I already had an idea of how things might go...and my stomach sank.

"Y-yes?"

"In such times as these, we turn to the guidance of the God of Iron and Fire, and beseech the God of Creation! Mister Margilus, how about it?! Will you defeat the rust beasts that have threatened our home?!"

The rust beasts were a fearsome foe.

According to legend, these beasts had destroyed the base the dwarves used prior to establishing Axeholm. They were shaped like lizards with six legs, and there were red masses like spots of rust all over their bodies. Each individual monster was at least three meters in length.

The scariest part about them was what they ate. These monsters had a bodily fluid that contained some sort of acid, which they used to corrode metal, then eat the rust that was generated. The cheekiest part of all was that they preferred rust from the rarest and purest metals. If it meant getting a taste of such valuable metal, they had no problem attacking dwarves and humans.

Their acid could also be used as a means of attack. Normal warriors and soldiers didn't stand a chance, and even their equipment wasn't safe from corrosion.

These monsters were a natural enemy to dwarves, whose livelihoods depended on mining and blacksmithing.

When discovered years earlier, they'd lived in a pack of about ten monsters, but they had now formed a colony a hundred monsters strong. One had grown especially mighty, and was now widely reviled as the "Rust King."

Currently, the rust beasts were settled in a corner of the Iron Fan mountain range to the east of Axeholm. Apparently, they hadn't struck as far as Axeholm yet, but the problem was that the monsters had built their nest at Mount Njord. That peak was a sort of mecca for the dwarves, as well as a valuable source of ores.

Thus, the dwarves had been unable to mine sufficient ore for over a year now. The rust beasts were also proliferating and expanding their nest, meaning the situation was only going to grow more dire.

They had already sent two brigades to try and defeat them, but the results were disastrous. The worst part was that their weapons and armor had turned to rust and so become food for the beasts.

"So you see," I explained to everyone, "having these things living nearby is a threat to our prosperity."

I'd returned to the guest quarters to explain Garde's request to my friends.

But really, was it physically possible for the bodily fluids of a living being to corrode metal? I didn't really know. It might not have been strictly relevant, but there was a similar monster in *D&B*...

Clara pursed her lips. "Rust beasts, is it? I've heard rumors about them, but I didn't realize that they were growing in numbers again..."

"They seem quite strong," said Ild. "To think they have the power to rust iron..."

I knew there were monsters and magical beings in this world, but I hadn't realized that there was one species causing so much damage. I'd never planned to try and become a monster hunter, but my interests were in line with the dwarves' right now. "In any case, this is a formal request from all of Axeholm. Let's accept."

"Yes, you're quite right. And I will negotiate proper compensation for your work," Ild insisted. I wasn't looking forward to that detail, but if it meant helping out with the costs of the highway construction or getting preferential treatment in trade, then it would really help.

"I've used a lot of spells today already," I said. "Let's leave

tomorrow morning, after I've fully charged my combat spells."

Once we dispersed, I suddenly had a thought. *What I just said was the same as saying, "If we're attacked tonight, I'll be in trouble," wasn't it?*

According to the information we got from the dwarves, the rust beasts hadn't shown any sign of attacking Axeholm yet, but still.

If Yagi was the game master, that would definitely have been foreshadowing.

There was no game master in Sedia. I knew that, but I still had a certain gut feeling. Perhaps I was overthinking things, but forewarned is forearmed, and there was no reason not to be cautious. I asked Feivel to help make a few preparations outside of Axeholm.

The next morning, we were fortunate enough not to wake up to an attack. I rose relatively early and opened my spellbook. I needed to charge the spells I'd need for the day's hunt.

From the outside, it looked like I was just reading through a spellbook, but my imagined self in my inner world was busy writing things down on blank paper. This was the ritual by which shape and form was given to my magical powers in the form of spells, and then preserved within my consciousness.

Just when I was about to finish writing my first spell...

"Hmm?"

I lifted my real-life head. I thought I'd heard something. Well, that much distraction wouldn't really bother me that labored within.

"My lord!" Reyha bounded into my guestroom. At this point, the inner world me was right in the middle of copying the spells. I had a really bad feeling about this.

"What is it, Reyha?"

"It's an attack. The rust beasts have come!"

Chapter 18

AXEHOLM, a stone spire as big as a skyscraper, now faced a crisis.

Until now, the rust beasts had stayed in the ore mine they'd commandeered, but a group of them had suddenly moved in. From above, we could see countless shadows swarming the outer wall of Axeholm, like ants attacking a sugar hill.

The silhouette of a rust beast was a lizard with six legs. But its entire body was covered in thick, red-brown rust, and an unusually long tongue waved from its mouth. It could be distinguished by the straight, pointy horns that grew out of its head. The horns in the back were long, and the ones in the front were short.

"Shweee!"

"Sha-geee!"

I had once heard a gecko "crying" on a video site, and that's exactly what these things sounded like. Their eerie cries enveloped Axeholm.

The beasts swarmed over the outer walls of Axeholm, looking for a hole to infiltrate. They stuck their heads into the narrow windows and air holes within the stone. With their three-meter-long bodies, they couldn't really fit through any of these holes, but when they saw metal parts and ore inside, they happily stuck out their tongues.

Those long tongues had holes in their tips that looked like the mouth of a hose, and their entire length dripped with a noxious mucus. Any metal touched by the tips of those tongues immediately started to corrode from the mucus—it was essentially a powerful acidic spit. Ultimately, they used the hole in their tongues to happily slurp up the rust.

The outer walls of Axeholm were mainly made of stone, which had kept them from infiltrating the perimeter, at least so far.

Meanwhile, the main gate was in crisis mode. Gazod of House Valvaron, leader of Axeholm's military, shouted orders to his troops.

"Damn it! We need rocks! Bring rocks or lumber!"

"Y-yes, sir!"

Apparently, it had all begun with a surprise attack at dawn. The one saving grace was that they hadn't yet opened the main gate at the time. Even so, there were more than ten beasts clambering along the

outside of the main gate, corroding the door to their hearts' content. This was a rare case in which the dwarves' belief that metal was better than wood had backfired. The main gate of Axeholm was primarily made of steel.

At this rate, the main gate would soon fall, and the rust beasts would pour into Axeholm. Gazod was going hoarse barking orders to somehow try and avoid that fate.

All the other dwarves desperately struggled to help the soldiers of House Valvaron. They stacked up stone and wood in front of the main gate as quickly as they could. The dwarves had prepared for a rust beast attack, but they'd never anticipated an attack of this magnitude.

Thoom!

"Aaagh!!"

Ribbons of pink flesh slipped through numerous holes punched in the main gate. Masses of mucus burst from the tips of the rust beasts' tongues.

A saliva acidic enough to melt steel struck the soldiers as they clutched their spears, splashing over the workers who were carrying lumber. The victims screamed, rolling around frantically to try and save themselves.

"Wipe off the spit!" barked the commander.

"W-we can't keep up, sir! There's too many!"

"Help me...!"

The dwarves' sturdy armor was useless. Everyone hit with the saliva swiftly burned into smoldering husks. All that remained was rust and corpses. Then, the tongues that had shot the mucus greedily stretched out to slurp up the delicious rust.

"Dammit! Where are the siege weapons?! We'll hit 'em with the power of fire-water! Let's fry these blighters!"

"N-no, commander! Look! The main gate!"

The gate towered more than ten meters high, but it was filled with corroded holes. The whole thing began slowly caving in under the weight of the rust beasts stuck to its outer side.

"Shweee!"

"Sha-gee, gee! Shree-ree-reeee!"

The six-legged beasts waved their long tongues and tails as they waltzed right into Axeholm.

“Lord Margilus!”

“Margilus!”

I went out into the corridor with my Staff of Wizardry and Infinity Bag slung across my back to meet up with my friends. We didn’t really know the situation, but judging from the commotion we heard below, the rust beasts were already inside.

“Lord Margilus!” An out-of-breath dwarf ran up, calling for me. It was Feivel. Other dwarves were calmly evacuating humans from their guest quarters. I caught a glimpse of the blonde-haired girl among the fleeing merchants—the same girl we’d seen in the elevator. *I hope she makes it out in one piece.*

“A-Axeholm is surrounded by rust beasts,” Feivel informed us, “and the main gate has been destroyed!”

It took me a moment to process. “The main gate already fell?”

“I-It’s the worst thing that could have happened! The rust beasts are getting closer! I-If they come all the way in here...Please, I know this wasn’t the plan, but protect Axeholm!” Feivel begged me shamelessly, ignoring the fact that his glasses were slipping down. This desperation reminded me of when Mora had asked for my help in the past.

I didn’t even need to think about my answer. “Leave it to us.”

I took Clara, Reyha, and Lade and headed toward the main gate.

Apparently, there was some sort of shelter in the basement levels where Ild, Ted, and the three recruits would hole up.

In the end, we never reached the main gate. The rust beasts had already advanced as far as Main Street and were approaching the elevator hall.

There were so *many* of them. Monsters crowded the entire breadth of Main Street. The beautiful shop where Clara had been window shopping just days before was completely destroyed.

“If rust beasts really like precious metals,” Lade cut in, “then do you think they’re aiming for...you know...”

Lade eyed the sparkling green elevators. Every piece of them was made from mirsdine. If I had to think of an equivalent in

Japanese games, that stuff was probably Sedia's equivalent to mithril or adamantium. Lade was right. They'd love to get their disgusting tongues on it.

"Shu-gee-geee! Shree-ree-reeee!"

"Fire! Fire! Fire at will!"

The dwarf soldiers had formed a barricade at the entrance and were desperately firing their crossbows and ballistae.

A ballista is a giant artillery weapon that takes multiple people to load. It fires spear-like arrows, kind of like a giant crossbow. They had five ballistae lined up and were firing as quickly as they could. The actions of the soldiers in charge of operating the ballistae and the mechanisms on the ballistae were excellent. The considerable speed at which they shot the arrows compared to the length of the beasts made the dwarves look extremely skilled.

But...

Thud! Thud!

The beasts heartlessly climbed over their fallen, spear-skewered brethren. Shots of deadly mucus rained from their tongues. Each beast could only shoot one load of mucus at a time, but there were just so many of them.

"Whaaa?!"

"Aaaghh!!"

"It's hot! Hot! Heelp meee!"

The ballistae and the soldiers operating them were melting and crumbling. *This battle... Just the sheer grotesqueness of it is worse than the daemons.*

"Margilus! *Wall of Force!* That should protect us from the acid!"

Clara's advice wasn't bad, but I shook my head. "I used up all of my *Wall of Force* and *Wall of Stone* charges yesterday. I never got a chance to refresh."

Clara froze for a second. "What...?"

I knew I should have trusted my gut.

I cursed my own poor planning and tried to think of another plan. Part of me was paralyzed by the sheer gravity of the scene, but I had the mind of Geo Margilus, and it worked a mile a minute.

Since I had given that presentation to the dwarves the day before, I'd mostly charged spells for creating monsters and walls instead of attack spells. But that meant I had also mostly used up

spells like *Wall of Stone*, *Wall of Iron*, and *Create Monster*. What's more, I was unable to charge spells that morning, so I was left with very few choices at that moment.

For example, my Rank 7 spell situation was this:

RANK 7 SPELLS

Spell Name - Remaining Uses / Total Charged

Create Ogre Platoon - 0/2

Create Monster - 0/3

Sense of the Adept - 1/1

Apport - 1/1

Transport - 1/1

RANK 8 SPELLS

Spell Name - Remaining Uses / Total Charged

Create Monster: Special - 0/5

Wall of Force - 0/1

Greater Transform Other - 1/1

Six Runes - 1/1

RANK 9 SPELLS

Spell Name - Remaining Uses / Total Charged

Meteor - 2/2

Complete Recovery - 2/2

Time Stop - 1/1

Create Monster: Any - 1/2

Chaotic Wall - 1/1

Invincibility - 1/1

In here, *Meteor* and *Chaotic Wall* were too risky, and Rank 6 attack spells like *Fireball*, *Lightning*, or *Ice Storm* would run out too quickly. *Soldiers of Bronze* would make for good bait. We would have to fight the king beast later anyhow.

“Shreereeree!”

“Sha-gee!”

“Lord Margilus,” Feivel screamed, watching the beasts break through the barricade. “Is there nothing we can do?!”

I had no choice. I would have to start with *Create Monster: Any*.

“Hey.”

Something suddenly hit my shoulder, hard. It was Lade, putting his hand on my back.

I looked up at him, surprised. “Are you going to fight?”

“Fight?” Lade sneered beneath his ghoulish helmet. “A warrior only *fights* when he is hunting daemons. But since these bastards interrupted my day off...”

He slowly drew his greatsword.

“Today, I’m on pest control duty.”

“Wait just a second longer,” I cautioned Lade and Reyha.

The warrior had his blade braced on his shoulder, ready to go. Reyha stood with daggers in hand. My imagined self quickly dipped into the fifth-level spellbook archive.

Clara waved her staff beside me. “*Falbolza Chain!*”

“Shreereeree?!”

Eight fire arrows fell upon the beasts. The flames singed their rusty skin, but a bit of fire wasn’t enough to slay them. It did, however, slow their advance.

“Don’t give up!” the dwarf commander bellowed. “We stop them here!”

“Rah! Rah! Valor!”

“Valor!”

At their commander’s order, the dwarf soldiers used a wooden ladder to keep the beasts from advancing. It was probably an improvised response to deal with the strong acid spit, but I was impressed by how quickly they adapted, dropping fur and wooden boards on the beasts from above.

“As a consequence of this spell, the physical abilities of all allies within a three-meter radius of me will be enhanced. *Physical Boost!*”

“As a consequence of this spell, the weapons of all allies within a three-meter radius of me will be enhanced in both strength and accuracy. *Enchant!*”

It took a precious twenty seconds to cast those two spells. The glimmering enchantments enveloped my friends, strengthening both them and their weapons.

“Okay,” I cried out. “Do it!”

“Let’s not waste time,” rumbled Lade.

“On it,” said Clara.

We rushed into the tunnel that was filled with the strange monsters.

“Huh?” Clara let out a gasp of surprise, a fierce expression on her face.

“Shree-ree-reeee!”

“Aaagh!”

We soon discovered the purpose of the lopsided horns on the rust beasts’ heads. The short horns on their foreheads popped out as if powered by springs, skewering the dwarves. When that happened, the back horns shrank in size, so they must have been somehow sliding back and forth inside their heads. Perhaps they normally used those horns to mine for ore to eat.

“Hraaahh!”

A dwarf who’d been pierced through the middle swung his ax down with surprising force, crushing one of the eyes of the beast that had wounded him.

“Shu-gee?!”

It let out an eerie scream, but then aimed its acid tongue at the dwarf.

“Eyaaaagh!”

A dark shadow fell in front of that particular beast. It was Reyha, leaping as if gravity didn’t apply to her. Before her feet hit the ground, she had already cut off the tip of the beast’s tongue with her daggers.

“Shu-geee?!”

The beast arched back, screeching as the dwarf flipped into the air and fell. At that moment, a figure some three times larger than a dwarf rushed in.

“Hmph!”

With a sharp breath, Lade lunged straight ahead, greatsword

slashing for the kill. The impact of his blade to the beast's chest was an explosion. Its body, bigger than a cow's torso, split cleanly in half.

"Shu-gyeeeeaaah?!"

"Whoa...!" At the screams of the beast, the dwarves looked up in shock. "Damn it all, what was *that*?!"

"Shri-ree-reee!"

"Shwee!"

The other beasts began to realize that the warrior and dark elf weren't the kind of enemies they were used to. They all aimed their tongues in unison to create a shower of acidic saliva.

But those two weren't waiting around to be targets.

"Yah!"

Reyha leaped up again. Actually, it seemed as if she had yet to touch the ground. She bounded off the heads and backs of the beasts, then from the pillars and walls of the tunnel. Everywhere her foot touched, I saw a spark of something like lightning.

"Shu-gee?!"

"Shweee!"

Every time Reyha came close to a beast, she cut off its tongue, its head, or an errant limb. Blood sprayed copiously in her wake.

If Reyha was lightning, Lade was a tornado.

"Hyaaaaaah!"

"Shu-geeeaa?!"

"Shu-gee-gee-gee!"

As he stomped on his fallen prey, he hefted his mighty sword onto one shoulder to slash the throats of the beasts who remained. And then he swung—a huge arc that moved faster with every second. He spun off his back foot, drawing a large circle with his sword. Another beast tried to stretch out its tongue, but its head was instantly split in two.

Lade took a wide step with each new rotation, maintaining slashing speed. Soon he was on his third rotation. When his massive body finally stopped for a moment, a number of beasts moved in—

Only to be greeted by a wave of steel rotating in the opposite direction. Lade hadn't stopped. He had simply wound up his body inside his oddly shaped armor and then released it like a spring. No matter how many times the beasts targeted them with their acidic spit, Reyha and Lade never stopped carving through them.

Splattered pools of the saliva that had so easily melted the dwarves hissed all over the floor, and in some places, upon still-burning corpses. Standing in the ruin of the herd of beasts, we all finally had a moment to breathe.

“What about the others?” I asked the commander.

I kept an eye on the soldiers repairing the barricade and tending to the injured while I spoke to him. Feivel had already explained that he was the head of House Valvaron.

“Right,” he said. “Sounds like our other positions haven’t yet been compromised. But there are still beasts stuck to the outer walls... and the Rust King is approaching.”

Even given the gravity of the situation, the commander had a firm grasp of the battlefield. The biggest problem was going to be the king.

“First of all, can we push them back to the main gate?”

Reyha and Lade probably had a handle on that, though it was likely to take some time.

I used *Lightning* twice and *Ice Storm* once to clean up the rust beasts who were occupying Main Street. The only reason I had time to cast spells on beasts with acid spit at their disposal was because of Reyha and Lade’s extraordinary vanguard.

“Now I just have *Lightning* one more time and *Fireball* twice. I’m glad I kept *Destruction*, even if I can only cast it once. I doubt *Sleep* will work...”

The bisected and burnt corpses of monsters littered the path to the main gate. Reyha and Lade had both knelt down, looking exhausted. I think they were actually more tired than they might have been otherwise, thanks to the added power of their enchantments—they’d used up too much energy.

“They’re coming this way,” someone shouted.

“Mmm,” Lade grunted.

They were probably talking about the beasts that had been crawling on the outer wall. Had the things noticed that their companions had all been annihilated? They dexterously used their six limbs to drop down from the wall.

“Sorry, wizard.” The commander smiled grimly. “It’s going to

take a bit longer to patch this up. Can you buy us some time?"

"Please, Mister Margilus!" Feivel shouted.

They both looked at me hopefully. We had to somehow take care of the beasts outside and slay the king...

Of course I'd do it. "Leave it all to us."

We moved outside. Enemies dotted the wide-open space beyond the gate. I took stock of the situation and my remaining spells, trying to decide which to use next.

I couldn't waste even one more spell.

"Grooooo!"

I used *Create Monster: Any* to make three red dragons appear in the air above Axeholm. They were the small red dragons I'd used more than once before. Since they were Level 12, I was able to make three at once.

The commander stepped out after us. "Goodness... I know I saw them yesterday, but it really is amazing..."

I telepathically commanded the dragons to attack the rust beasts. From the perspective of the freely flying, fire-breathing dragons, the beasts probably looked like little more than bugs. The problem was that this spell only lasted for thirty minutes.

"Wow, that's great!"

Dwarves watched from the windows of Axeholm, cheering us on.

"Get 'em!"

"Burn those rusty monsters up!"

The dragons got right to work. Their breath immolated the beasts on the Axeholm outer wall and in the surrounding fields. The dragons were more effective in one-on-one combat than I'd expected, but the problem was the sheer number of beasts.

I prioritized attacks on the beasts that were closest to the main gate, but thirty minutes didn't seem like enough time to wipe them all out.

"Wizard!"

"What is it?"

It seemed the commander had received a report from a messenger. He looked at me with sad eyes. "It looks like the Rust King is finally approaching. We're going to take him down with the troops we have left. I'm entrusting the defense of Axeholm to you!"

I was silent.

It wasn't only sadness I saw in the commander's eyes. There was a burning sense of mission and fighting spirit. The same resolve was evident among the workers and laborers struggling to get the main gate closed and the soldiers picking up their weapons.

It reminded me of the way Sedam and Gillion had looked at me in front of the daemon nest before. Thinking of Japan, I wondered if it was the same look in the eyes of SDF and rescue workers when faced with a disaster. To me, who'd never done anything but office work, it was a grand thing.

But... But...

"No." I stepped forward. "You've got it the wrong way around."

The commander balked. "What?"

"Garde already gave me my duty. And it should be a magic user who takes on such an unreasonable opponent."

I couldn't hide behind my 'office worker' facade forever. No matter what I was inside, I had already become a lord. I was the great magic user. Even if I was just faking it.

I wiped my sweaty palms on my robes and gripped my Staff of Wizardry. "Well, no matter how strong the Rust King is, we're outside now. Let's see how it likes the taste of *Meteor*."

"A meteor?! No, Mister Margilus, you mustn't!"

Huh?

Feivel was desperately trying to stop me.

All of the dwarves' living quarters and their important public areas were located underground. They were lucky that the rust beasts and their king hadn't found a way to get underground, but if stones dropped from above and crushed the basement levels...it would be bad.

It made sense. "Oh, I see."

"You see *what*, exactly?!" Clara yelled at me, shrill. "If you can't drop your meteor, then how will you defeat the king?!"

I wanted to say that there was more to me than just dropping rocks, but my spell stock was lacking. The dragons were busy exterminating the beasts on Axeholm's walls.

"I can use low-rank spells to wear him down," I assured her. "And I've got something else up my sleeve."

That last part was true. It wasn't something I wanted to resort to, though. Well, as long as the Rust King wasn't a super monster like a Great Wyrms or something, it would all work out.

"My lord!" Reyha stood up. "I'm coming with you!"

Lade slowly levered himself to his feet. "Seems like there's still a few more pests to take care of..."

I appreciated the sentiment, but I shook my head. "I'm going to attack from a distance with spells. You guys protect the main gate."

I used a spell to summon a black horse with a pale blue aura. I hadn't used *Phantom Horse* in a while. I would ride him out to take on the king a safe distance away from Axeholm.

"Wait!" Clara grabbed my arm. Before I had time to ask her what she was doing, she mounted the saddle of my phantom horse.

"You can't cast spells while holding the reins, can you? I'll steer. Get on!"

"O-oh..."

Clara had ridden on the phantom horse with me before. Back then, we'd even flown. And she was right, if I rode on the back, the phantom horse could fly while I cast my spells. We'd be like some kind of four-legged bomber.

There was only one thing wrong with this picture...

Chapter 19

THE COMMANDERS AND SOLDIERS saluted us as we departed. Reyha saw us off with tears in her eyes.

Clara and I took off on the phantom horse.

They wouldn't last long, but Clara cast *Protection* and *Mana Shield* protection spells for us. I had already used *Invisible Demon* since the night before, so I put it to use.

"Are you seeing this?" Clara asked.

"Hard to miss it..." The thing was huge!

We were still in sight of Axeholm.

From there we could see a massive figure. But this wasn't a figure we were happy to see.

The Rust King appeared from the shadow of the rocky mountain in front of us.

The shape was undoubtedly the same as the rust beasts. It had six legs and looked like a lizard with a body covered in rust. There were horns jutting out of its head, and it possessed some four or five outstretched tongues.

But the *size*...

"It's as big as the digdag worm from yesterday," I said.

"And that's only the length..."

While we were flying high in the sky, I looked down at the earth-shaking king. It was about thirty meters long. It was about the same size as a digdag worm in length, but the king, with its barrel-like torso and six skittering legs, was a far more menacing presence.

When I imagined what the scene would look like if it reached Axeholm, it reminded me exactly of an anteater. The more I thought about it, the truer it seemed. If Axeholm was an anthill, did that mean the beasts had been waiting until it was stocked full of food?

Forget about anteaters and concentrate on your plan, I urged myself.

"Get us a little closer," I told Clara. "I'll use *Destruction*. If all goes well, it might be over in one shot."

"Got it. Moving closer!" Clara gallantly kicked the phantom horse into an airy gallop.

We plunged as fast as a roller coaster. I watched the Rust King grow bigger and bigger as we approached, waiting for the perfect moment to cast my spell.

“As a consequence of this spell, one target will be obliterated. *Destruction!*”

My imagined self rolled the decahedral dice at the bookrest for the tome of *Destruction* within the sixth-level spellbook archive. Though there was a risk of failure, an instant-death spell was definitely best here.

Just so long as I didn’t fumble...

Please, work!

I put the image of failure out of my mind and rolled the dice. It felt like an eternity passed while I was waiting for the clattering sound of the dice to stop.

The result was...

“*Destruction!!*”

Fortunately, the spell activated successfully. My two selves completed the spell out loud in unison. Shining beads of light shot forth into the Rust King’s huge, lumbering body.

“Shu-gee-gee-geeee?!”

The king’s cry was even more shrill and metallic than the other beasts’. Its red, rust-covered body burst from the inside, sundered by the power of *Destruction*. It turned to dust right before my eyes...but didn’t disappear!

“What?!” I shouted.

“What happened?!” Clara demanded.

There was no doubt that all the rust covering the king had flown off in chunks and pieces. It spread like a cloud, obstructing our vision.

But the king itself was still alive. Its rock-like skin had been hidden by a solid layer of red rust. Now it was exposed, but it didn’t look like it had suffered any damage.

Destruction is a single-target spell. In other words, not only was the king too large to easily strike dead, under the spell’s rules, the red rust was treated as an existence independent of its body.

How is that fair...?

“Margilus! What next?!”

“Oh! Next, I hit it with *Fireball*.”

Fooom!

The king stretched out its tongue at the phantom horse circling overhead and spat out a stream of saliva. It wasn't a single shot like the beasts had fired. This was more like a sprinkler, spraying in all directions and melting everything in its path.

I held on for dear life as the horse swooped to safety. “Agh!”

The hell?!

Not even the fanciest flying would save us from this acid rain for long.

Clara decided to take the phantom horse down. The horse's body exuded white wisps of smoke. The steed neighed in pain from the burning of the king's powerful acid.

Thanks to Clara's multiple protective spells, we didn't suffer any serious damage. But—

“Neiiigh!”

“Hold on tight!”

The phantom horse had excellent mobility, but it wasn't made for combat. It couldn't withstand the strong acid rain, and it gradually lost altitude. No...it was crashing.

I held Clara around the waist with one arm and the saddle with the other. Was there some way I could protect her? I was glad I had my staff with me.

“Margilus!”

I must have only been out for a moment. I picked myself up from the ground.

Clara's glorious rear end was right in front of me. She stood firm, guarding me. Beyond the gorgeous blonde, the giant Rust King towered over us.

“It's still the usual ten seconds, right?!”

“That's right...”

That was all I needed to hear. I knew exactly what she meant. My body hurt all over, but I got up and stood next to Clara.

For a moment, she looked at me with her blue eyes. We were finally both standing, covered in mud. We naturally moved closer, holding each other up.

At times like these, we didn't need to be hesitant or circumspect. I was almost having fun.

“Shu-geee!”

The Rust King opened its mouth wide and aimed its multiple tongues in our direction. Upon closer examination, it had the flat, varied teeth of an omnivore.

The holes at the tips of its tongues swelled.

I had already decided which spell to use. I felt scared, but brave at the same time. I was sure Clara would come through for me.

“As a consequence of this spell—”

“Let's not die! *Falga Hails Luxord!*”

Clara cast her spells in a beautiful voice, even at times like this. Her extended fingertip shined for just a moment. A second later, a glow bright enough to burn my eyes cut through the sky in a flash.

“Shugeeah?!”

The scorching light burned off several of the king's tongues, piercing clean through its upper jaw. There air split with the kind of whooshing sound I'd only ever heard in science fiction movies. This was probably the first time the king had ever suffered such an attack. It was no longer spitting acid, and instead shook its head like crazy.

“Geo!”

“I summon the statue that belongs to me. *Apport!*”

At the very moment Clara called out to me, I finished casting my spell. The activation judgment was successful.

Apport was a spell that summoned objects through space. I'd prepared a trick up my sleeve last night for precisely this situation.

I'd thought the probability that I would need to use this spell was very low. But the time...was now!

CLANG!

“Huh?!”

Between us and the writhing king, a grey wall and two stone pillars suddenly appeared. We looked up at a massive statue with a barrel-like body and two long, thick arms.

“Golem,” I cried out, “Crush that monster!”

CLANG!

The night before, I'd snuck out to the fifteen-meter-tall Kadrak statue in front of Axeholm. There, I'd made a few...special adjustments. The Kadrak became the main material for a unique application of *Create Monster: Special*. I turned it into a Living Stone Statue.

It wouldn't have worked if it had been an ordinary statue. Since it was a sophisticated human-shaped statue that even had articulated joints, I was able to further convert it into a Living Stone Golem without too much processing.

Under the logic of my spells, a golem counted as an item rather than a monster. By the power of *Apport*, it whisked from its emplacement to the ground right before my eyes. The giant golem slowly swung out its fist—the sound of its joints moving was music to my ears.

CLANG!

“Shu-greeee?!”

The giant fist of rock hit the Rust King square in the head. The monster only reached up to the stomach of the golem, and couldn't withstand the impact. It let out an unpleasant scream as it tried to retreat.

“Again, golem!”

CLANG!

This time, the fist dropped straight down from above, striking the Rust King in the back. Without any more red rust as armor, there was no hope for the king.

Or so I thought.

“Shu-gee-gee-gee!”

At the king's roar, Clara gasped in surprise. “Was that...magic?!” She sat sprawled on the ground—it seemed she had expended the last of her mana.

The monster's maw opened wide. “Greee!”

The cry carried a strange, almost musical timbre. There was power in that sound, power equivalent to a spell. Red rust appeared out of thin air, rapidly materializing all over the king's body.

“No way,” Clara muttered, stunned. “If it has this much magical power...”

But it had made a mistake by casting a protection spell instead of attacking the golem.

I called for the fatal blow. “All right, golem! Finish it!”

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The golem swung its long, thick arms around and slammed its fists into the body of the king. Its onslaught was merciless. Every successive hit sent the red rust flying, only for the king to repair the damage with magic. This went on for a while.

The king spat out its acidic mucus from its remaining tongues, but soon enough, it ran out of the strength it needed to regenerate its rust-red armor. I issued a new order.

“Lift it up, golem!”

CREEEAK!

The golem faithfully picked up the king’s lizardlike body and hoisted it high. The injured king’s legs furiously pumped as it tried to escape. It aimed every horn on its head at the golem’s body.

CRACK!

The horns swung with all the force of a pile driver. One of them came in contact with the golem, but it shattered easily. The dwarves’ sturdy stone statue had also been enhanced with magic. It might be said that the golem was itself a completely magical weapon.

“As a consequence of this spell, I will summon a lightning bolt two meters wide and twenty meters high. *Lightning!*”

“Shugeeaaa?!”

I aimed my Staff of Wizardry at the Rust King and called down the thunder.



For a moment, a pale blue light spread out over the earth, and a roaring wave of sound shook us where we stood. The lightning that fell from the heavens penetrated the king just as I'd planned, coursing in a straight line through its entire body, top to bottom.

As if to show off its sheer tenacity, the king endured my *Lightning*.

But I had more where that came from. I used every last attack spell in my arsenal, one after another, until I'd completely burned its giant body.

Well, almost every spell. I did restrain myself from dropping *Meteor*.

When I returned to Axeholm with the golemized Kadrak, the dwarves gave us an enthusiastic welcome. I instructed the golem to walk every step away of the way.

Garde, head of House Zamslon, certified me as a "true friend of Axeholm" there on the spot. The dwarves responded with raucous cheers.

Clara had also played a big part in our victory, but she fell asleep right after we got back to Axeholm. Apparently, it was a side effect of the *Physical Boost* spell. Reyha and Lade weren't feeling too well, either.

On the way, Clara had explained what it felt like to receive such a blessing. "...Immediately after your enchantment fell over me, my power doubled. Truthfully, it was much the same during the previous battle at the daemon nest."

According to Clara, she didn't normally have the aptitude needed to use the ultra-high-level spell *Falga Hails Luxord*.

Yet according to the rules of *D&B*, *Physical Boost* had no effect on the mental ability scores of INT and WIS. If that was true, then why had her sorcery been enhanced?

Clara and the others were unable to attend, but there was a

celebration and several ceremonies. It all took about two days.

Regarding my appropriating Kadrak, a monument that had taken fifteen years to build, I was prepared to weather scorn and anger. Contrary to my expectations, I was praised. When I told them that since it wasn't really made from golem materials in the first place, that its golem-like movements were only temporary, I was met with disappointment.

The dwarves reaffirmed their commitment to the anti-daemon alliance with Castle Getaeus, and vowed to swiftly commence trade. They also promised maximum cooperation in establishing a tunnel and road to Filsand. Compensation for exterminating the rust beasts had been paid out in both cash and goods. We'd won a considerable wealth of money and supplies.

Trade with Filsand, however, still required the consent of Filsand itself.

While I was considering whether we should return to Castle Getaeus first before setting out on a new mission, Garde came to me with a proposal.

"Conveniently, the daughter of the duke of Filsand happens to be here visiting on business. Why don't we consult with her tomorrow?"

Later that night, we ate together in my guest room.

"...I didn't realize that girl was the daughter of the duke of Filsand," Clara muttered. "How troublesome."

"Our first impression might not have been the best," I agreed.

That duke's daughter was the one we'd happened to meet in the elevator.

Clara might have been embarrassed, but I felt pretty awkward myself. Chances were good that I'd made the worst impression of all.

Garde took on the role of intermediary, but the actual discussions were to begin the next day. *What will I do if she refuses?*

"I believe she's Elisabel Roney Filsandia," said Ild. "I've heard rumors about her. They say she's something of a prodigy when it comes to trade negotiations and diplomacy."

"She knows about your battle with the rust beasts, correct?" Reyha pointed out. "Her impression must have changed after that."

"Well, just sitting here fretting about it won't change anything,"

I said. “Why don’t we take a bath to prepare for tomorrow?”

“Mmm,” Lade intoned pleasantly.

“Oh, yes!”

Everyone from Castle Getaeus had already become enamored with the hot springs. They stood up quickly at my suggestion.

Then...

Just as we were heading to the door to leave, there was a violent knock.

Reyha’s response came fast and sharp. “Who goes there? This is the room of the great magic user, Lord Geo Margilus. State your name and business.”

The stiff voice of a man both angry and nervous replied from the other side. “I’m sorry for coming so late. I am a member of the Filsand knights. We have lost track of the daughter of the duke of Filsand, Lady Elisabel. I want to search your room.”

Chapter 20

FILSAND WAS ORIGINALLY the capital of a nation whose leaders descended from the ancient Schultz royal family, but when the Velde Kingdom invaded, it fell under the rule of General Darmund. Brother to the king, Darmund later took the title of duke of Filsand.

This all happened some twenty years ago. Many people loyal to the Schultz family fled south, earnestly hoping to retake Filsand someday. They'd staged repeated raids and attacks over the years.

Fifteen years ago, Elisabeth Roney Filsandia was born to the duke of Filsand and a Schultz princess.

That Schultz princess, Shayla, had been taken captive by Filsand during their invasion. The duke took her as his second wife in order to increase his legitimacy as ruler of Filsand. Elisabeth's mother hated her husband with all her might.

Luckily, Shayla did not try to impart her hate and resentment onto her daughter. But if a child is raised with that much conflict existing between her parents, it surely has a negative effect.

Nevertheless, Elisabeth's father clearly cared for both his daughter and his captive wife. Their life was not all that different from what had been afforded to his first wife and her children. Elisabeth had all the benefits of a noble education. She even had the opportunity to learn magic for self-defense.

Her eldest brother was especially kind to her.

That is why she chose to work as a diplomat for Filsand, where she was raised, instead of on behalf of the Schultz partisans, whom she had never met. And she did, in fact, work extremely hard.

Elisabeth had come to Axeholm in the first place for negotiations—the Schultz fighters had taken a castle, one that would require siege weapons to liberate. The dwarves were not interested in human wars, so she struggled to convince them to sell her the weapons Filsand needed, but ultimately, she was successful.

(The main reason negotiations had not proceeded smoothly was all the damage the dwarves had suffered from the beasts. The second reason was that once the beasts were finally gone, the dwarves were busy preparing a ceremony for the mighty wizard in their midst.)

Elisabeth was only fifteen years old, but she had already worked as a representative for the duke in her own country, in Land Barthes, and in Shrendal. She had a track record of many successful

negotiations.

Of course, she hadn't always possessed the authority to negotiate on her realm's behalf. At first, she'd just been sent on missions to lend her name to the proceedings. She was a figurehead. The emissaries and diplomats would take care of business.

However, she understood her own power as an "attractive, innocent, naive girl" well. She had a natural affinity for using that to her advantage.

She achieved impressive results, but not because she came up with ingenious schemes. She had a simple, solid foundation: Make the other party feel good, listen to what they have to say, and make them want to speak to you again. By repeating those steps with the relevant parties at every opportunity, her efforts bore steady fruit.

Through the power of empathy, she closed the emotional divide that existed between negotiating parties. Once folks felt closer together, reconciling their competing interests became far easier. A detachment of the duke's civil service staff followed her around on her travels, as numerous as they were skilled.

Those who were less fond of Elisabeth claimed she deployed her seductive wiles and cried false, cynical tears get her way. Perhaps there was a grain of truth to those rumors, but Elisabeth simply believed in using every gift that the gods had given her to get the job done.

That is how she ended up working for Filsand, but those who had conquered her mother's people felt contempt for the blood that ran through her veins. Their insidious harassment never ceased, and there had been more than one occasion where she'd been called a barbarian to her face. Even her relatives, such as her father's first wife and her second brother, did not hide their hate for her.

And then, six months ago, everything changed.

Suddenly, the position she enjoyed, long preserved by the stability of her parents' relationship, came crumbling down.

Her mother fell ill, and at the same time, her eldest brother was captured and killed by the Schultz partisans.

The only remaining blood relatives of the duke were her and her second brother.

If Elisabeth was hated and deemed incompetent by her father, this

probably never would have happened. But his first wife and her second brother feared her, because she had earned her father's trust as a diplomat recognized far and wide for her abilities.

It didn't take long before the pressure from her second brother exceeded mere harassment.

It culminated in attempted assassination.

It happened a few hours before the Filsand knight had come to Geo's room.

After negotiations with the dwarves, Elisabel visited a human-friendly restaurant. Her two knightly guards had come along to drink.

"But that sorcerer Geo is crazy," one said, knocking back his mug.

"Sure don't want to ever be on the wrong side of a monster like him," the other man agreed.

Right in front of Elisabel, daughter of the duke, the knights chatted eagerly about the giant stone statue they'd seen on the day of the monster raid—and the sorcerer who'd commanded it.

Elisabel didn't reprimand them, instead giving a sweet smile as she took small bites of dwarf cookies.

Even though they were her guards, their only role was to protect her along the road and inside of Axeholm. She'd already realized that they'd actually been hired to assassinate her on the way back to Filsand. She figured the order had to have been given by her brother.

These days, there were often undead on the road that passed near the Twilight Wastelands. In rare cases, even daemons would appear. It wasn't an easy route to traverse, and it wouldn't be hard to make her death look like an accident.

Killing me after the negotiations with the dwarves were complete... How rich...and so very efficient, brother...

"Miss Elisabel, you saw it, too, right? That big old statue stomped right into battle!"

"Y-yes," she said. "Admittedly, I didn't fully understand what was happening...but it truly was amazing."

That sort of magic ought not to exist. That man holds power the likes of which Sedia has never seen. Filsand cannot help but be wary of him... But what sort of man is he, inside...?

She muttered to herself as she remembered the other day, when she'd seen a middle-aged man at the elevators, grinning licentiously at the woman who had half-wrapped herself around him.

But he did offer his hand to the girl to help her stand up, and he seemed to have a refreshing attitude outside of that. At the very least, he wasn't a domineering fellow...he might even be a genuinely good person.

She'd traveled all over the world as a representative of the duke, meeting vast numbers of people. Now she took a minute to parse through the list of associates in her head.

"Ahhh..." She sighed. "There's just no point anymore."

"Hmm? Elisabel, did you say something?"

"No, it's nothing. After this round, we'll be heading back to our rooms, so please go ahead and order whatever you'd like."

"Is that so?" The knight grinned. "Don't mind if I do."

Silence reigned.

Almost an hour had passed.

The two knights were face down on the table, sleeping soundly. *It seems that my emergency-use medicine came in handy after all.*

Elisabel politely called over the dwarven waiter. "I'm afraid my companions have overindulged. Please let them rest here for a bit." A moment later, she excused herself from the restaurant.

Of course, she didn't forget to take with her the certificate plates that the knights needed to move around Axeholm.

I don't really have anything like a plan, but I suppose I'll just have to improvise.

The castle siege weapons would take a few weeks to complete.

She should have taken the time to carefully construct a plan of action. But here she was, recklessly charging ahead. Truth be told, she was worried that if she waited too long, she'd lose her nerve.

Elisabel was swift-footed, and she quickly arrived at the shelter where guest horses and carriages were kept. Her certificate plate was an expensive one, and it afforded her the same freedoms as native dwarves to move around Axeholm.

She skillfully took the reins from the attendant of the swift horse

that had carried her here from Filsand.

And just like that, she had successfully escaped from Axeholm—or rather, from the Filsand knights.

“Windstar, I’m sorry, but please hurry... *Cloak of Flames!*”

Even though she was wearing tights and a dress that didn’t even cover her thighs—hardly ideal for riding—she didn’t have time to care. Her staff, decorated with the star and sword of Filsand, was swiftly engulfed in flames. Its light illuminated the road brightly enough to allow her horse to run at full speed.

She didn’t know whether the Filsand knights—no, her assassins—had started looking for her. *It’s not a matter of if, but when. They’re definitely coming... Even if I run away, I’m just extending my life by half a day or so...*

“It’s just as my mother once said,” she murmured aloud. “We are all of us slaves to fate...”

She kicked her horse into a full gallop. With a heavy heart, she entrusted her own fate to the animal’s thundering hooves.

“I’m sorry for coming at night,” the armored soldier told us. “I am a member of the Filsand knights. We have lost track of the daughter of the duke of Filsand, Elisabel. I would like to search your rooms.”

Those words from the other side of the door were completely unexpected. We all looked at each other and found ourselves united in bewilderment.

“That—”

Clara looked like she was going to give a sharp and haughty retort as usual, but I put a hand up to stop her.

“I’ll ask just to make sure...” I said, somberly. “Does anyone here know where the duke’s daughter is?”

Silence.

Of course everyone shook their heads. And of course I had no idea, either. Incidentally, Ted and the three recruits had been assigned to a different section, so they weren’t here. But I had my doubts that

they were motivated enough to stir up this kind of trouble.

“We’ll cooperate with the search,” I said. “But perhaps you could please explain the circumstances?”

“Of course,” the knight said.

Upon hearing his gruff reply, my friends all casually picked up their weapons. That felt like good judgment to me. I took my own Staff of Wizardry from Reyha as I headed over toward her.

“I will open the door now,” she declared. “You will treat Lord Margilus with the proper respect.”

After Reyha made her cold remark and opened the door, the unarmed knights came into the room and looked around.

“Ah...please accept our apologies,” said the one.

“She’s not here,” said another.

“Not here, either,” said a third.

“Again,” said an older knight, who I supposed was their leader, “we are terribly sorry for the inconvenience.”

While a number of other knights checked the rearmost bedroom and adjoining chambers (apparently I was being treated as a VIP, so my guest quarters formed a suite), the older knight explained the situation to us.

“We are the Star Shield Knights of Filsand. My name is Adad, true-born heir to a proud knightly lineage. About an hour ago, Elisabeth disappeared. The two knights who were guarding her... Well, we have lost contact with them as well. That’s why we’ve taken it upon ourselves to perform a search.”

“Hmmm...” It wasn’t much of an explanation. Perhaps they didn’t quite have a grasp on the situation yet.

“Isn’t it a little bit early to be worried? Axeholm is a big place,” Clara said, irritated, both hands on her hips.

It was a rational opinion. She was cooperating with the search, but considering my position, it wasn’t out of line to level a few complaints.

“Well... No,” said the knight. “You see, the princess is a key person in Filsand, and as such, her life is always in danger. We are under strict orders from the duke never to let her out of our sight, even for a moment...”

Adad’s face was pale, and he was blinking quite a lot. He seemed awfully worried, but I reckoned it wouldn’t be easy to say calm if her life truly was in danger.

This was bad timing. I was supposed to consult with her about trade tomorrow.

Well, even if I wasn't, a teenage girl's life was at risk. Even if she was a stranger we hardly knew, we should still be helping.

"Sir Adad," I said, "if you don't mind, we would like to help you search for Elisabeth. What do you say?"

"What?!" Adad's eyes goggled, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was it really such a surprising offer?

"Ah, well...that's quite all right," he assured me. "We've already troubled you enough. It is our duty to keep the princess safe, after all."

Hmm?

Could they really afford to refuse our help?

The only other knights I knew were the Calbanera Knights, and they were a bit odd... The knights of this world seemed like a fairly inflexible bunch.

"Be that as it may, shouldn't the first priority be Elisabeth's safety?" I gestured with my empty hand. "I think I know some magic that would be of great aid to your search."

"Well, err... Forgive me, but I don't see how getting involved in our business is of any advantage to you..."

"Actually, I had planned to propose some negotiations to her tomorrow. It would be a problem for me if she doesn't turn up."

"I see, but even so..."

What was up with this guy? Something about him just oozed suspicious. It seemed almost like these knights didn't have the princess's best interests at heart. I wished I had my ESP Medal on me, but it was in my closet with my Infinity Bag.

"Sir Adad," I intoned flatly.

While I stared him down, new knights burst into the room.

One of them murmured something unintelligible into Adad's ear, too quietly for us to overhear.

"I see," said the elder knight, seizing on the distraction. "Understood. My thanks."

Meanwhile, I turned my disappointed expression toward Reyha and made eye contact with her. It seemed that the faithful and competent dark elf understood what I was about.

"Excuse me, Master Margilus," Adad said, a little too quickly. "It

seems that we have now ascertained the princess's whereabouts. We'll be headed out to retrieve her. Please let me apologize again for this intrusion."

Clearly uncomfortable, Adad hastened out of the room, and the knights followed.

"What was that?!" Clara growled. "I feel like I just watched a jester's farce! *Suspicious*, a tragedy in five acts!"

"It didn't look like he had Elisabeth's best interests in mind at all," Ild said, calm by contrast.

It seemed we were all thinking the same thing.

"I found the two guards," Reyha said, in an oddly masculine tone. "It looks like they were drugged. The princess seems to have escaped from Axeholm by horse. We are preparing to give chase now."

"Huh?"

"That is what the messenger whispered into Adad's ear, my lord."

Reyha seemed a bit proud of herself for repeating the message in a young man's voice, just like the knight's. She not only had a good ear, she was also a master thespian.

"Well done, Reyha."

"Thank you."

But what did this mean?

It really seemed like those knights wanted the princess dead... At the very least, there was a reason she'd broken out to flee alone.

"But this has changed the situation completely," I muttered. "Actually, I don't even know what the situation is anymore."

I sat back down on the sofa, shaking my head. Until now, we'd thought the duke's daughter was missing and that there was some sort of enemy of her father's pursuing her. But if the knights were the ones after her life...that meant a civil dispute in Filsand.

But there were many different kinds of civil disputes.

"Do the knights simply have a grudge against her? Or is the duke trying to off his daughter?"

"We don't have enough information to know for sure," Clara

answered, deep in thought.

All my friends were puzzled.

“Tell me your opinion,” I said. “Do you see any benefit for us in saving Elisabel?”

“That’s tough.” Clara massaged her forehead. “If she is violating some Filsandian law, then it will hurt us to protect her. On the other hand, if an enemy of the duke is trying to kill her, we could win the duke’s favor by rescuing her.”

“No matter what the situation is, I think the largest benefit lies in ensuring her safety. Blood relation to a ruler is quite significant,” said Ild.

“Don’t ask me,” rumbled Lade.

Reyha’s answer was predictable. “I will do whatever you say, my lord.”

We didn’t know the exact situation, and therein lay the dilemma. If I were to make suppositions based on the knowledge we did have, I would say the girl was unlucky, and there was a villain trying to kill her. If we were to explore additional possibilities, it could be that Elisabel was a murderer, or had betrayed her own country in some way.

In other words, we wouldn’t know the truth about the princess if we didn’t try to save her.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s change the question. Do you think we should help Elisabel?”

“Well, of course we should,” said Ild. “She’s just a girl, and around the same age as Mora, is she not?”

“Put another way,” I pressed, “do you think we can afford to abandon her?”

“Just do whatever you want,” Lade said.

“I will do whatever you say, Lord Margilus,” said Reyha.

My friends answered exactly as I expected them to. Frankly, I thought that we should save her.

But I was no longer only a magic user. I was now also the lord of Castle Getaeus and steward of three villages. I could not afford to be in political opposition to the duke of Filsand.

“Hmmm...”

The knights already knew the faces of me and my friends. If we did save the princess, and it caused harm to the duke, it would be a

huge problem.

While I was deep in thought, Clara spoke up, sounding frustrated. "What are you waiting for? Don't we already have our answer?"

"Do we?"

"Let's say we did abandon Elisabeth and somehow won favor with the duke in so doing. Later, when we hear that she was killed, won't you be full of regret, wondering how things might have been different if you had only been there to do something?"

Hmm. I'd said something pretty similar to Clara in the nest. I couldn't compare daemons to our fellow humans, but...she was right.

"Okay. I've made my decision. We will rescue the princess." I stood up.

As I expected, Clara and Reyha both nodded.

"Change the way you think about things like this," said Ild. "Regardless of whether Elisabeth is the duke's ally or enemy, apprehending her will be worth something."

"Isn't that more or less what I said in the first place?"

"Those knights only said that there was a possibility that someone had it in for her. We just need to believe that and protect her in good faith."

"It looks like you've finally started thinking like a proper aristocrat," said Clara. I thought I was just being mature about the whole thing, but Clara looked pleased with herself.

Privately, I reaffirmed my belief that dividing society into classes was the opposite of good.

"In any case," I said, "before we go back to Castle Getaeus, shall we head on to Filsand?"

Ild, the veteran merchant, ignored my attempt at being crafty and expressed his opinion about our next move. "If we bring her back to our castle, we might be thought of as kidnappers. And it'll be a pain if we are held by a subordinate of the duke on top of our obligations to the warrior clan. Resolving talks as quickly as possible is ideal. It looks like we'll need to rely on Sedam's stewardship back home a little longer."

Either way, we had to negotiate trade with the duke of Filsand. *If we can succeed at saving his daughter and win favor with him, we may have an advantage in any negotiations. Though the opposite is also a possibility.*

“When exactly did we decide we were going to Filsand?” Lade had been watching in silence, looking grumpy. But now that he’d spoken up, he didn’t exactly sound like he was outright opposing the trip. I hoped he at least thought it was a good thing that we were trying to save a girl’s life.

“Perhaps it seems a bit arbitrary on my part...but I guess it’s the only way. I choose to believe that we’re doing the right thing.”

“So, the first step is to protect Elisabel and get her to safety. The best-case scenario would be if the knights don’t distract us.”

I gripped my staff. “Now, let’s move. We’re off to save Elisabel.”

In my head, I imagined discovering the duke’s daughter as she fled in the dark. I was already searching for a spell that would help us catch up with her.

According to the information in the conversation between the knights, Elisabel had fled from Axeholm. The problem was that we were at least one hour behind her, and we didn’t know which direction she was headed in. Also, we had to think about how to track her.

Ild weighed in first. “The only routes along which you could escape from Axeholm are the road heading northwest toward Yulei Village, or the road heading northeast toward Filsand. So it’s one or the other...”

“If it’s the duke who’s after her, then it would make sense for her to take the northwestern route,” Clara said.

I picked a few spells based on the opinions of Ild and Clara. At the same time, I allocated roles to each of my friends.

If Sedam were here, we could have thought of an even better plan...

“First, Ild, you meet up with Ted and the others. Then, tell the knights that we’ll be searching for the princess on our own. Emphasize that we are doing it in good faith and that we figure it can’t hurt. Then tell the dwarves, too.”

“Understood.”

“Clara, coordinate with the dwarves to search inside Axeholm just in case. There is a possibility that she faked her escape.”

“I see... Understood.”

“This is just a precaution, but Reyha, you take the northeastern route. If there are no signs of horse travel, please come back immediately. There may still be some surviving rust beasts out there. Be very careful.”

“As my lord wishes.”

Finally, I looked at Lade, who wore his usual sullen expression. “Lade.”

“What now? This has nothing to do with daemons. I don’t need to listen to your orders.”

“No, it’s not an order, it’s a favor. Can you stay here and protect everyone if it comes to that?”

Lade stayed planted on the sofa, holding his sword. He dropped his head a little, and parted his lips in a sigh. “I’ll just be sleeping here in my room. If anyone sirs up trouble, I’ll handle them as I see fit.”

“Sorry...but thank you.”

If I were only to judge by his words, it was hard to say if he really meant to cooperate or not, but I thanked him as if he cared. *Even after all his grumbling, he did help us in the battle against the rust beasts. He’s not a bad guy.*

“So, you’re going on the northwest route?” Lade inclined his chin. “I wonder if you can find one girl in the dark of night.”

“I’ve got an idea about that.”

A few minutes later I cast *Fly* and soared away from Axeholm.

Axeholm itself was illuminated with countless lights, but after I’d traveled northwest for only one minute, it was already so dark that I couldn’t even make out the shape of a road. If she was riding a horse here, it must be a pretty reckless journey.

After flying for a few more minutes, I caught up with a group of knights galloping on horseback through the night. I used *Physical Boost* to improve my eyesight and was able to confirm that they were indeed the Filsand knights. It seemed they hadn’t found her yet.

I passed the knights, but I didn’t find the girl ahead of them.

If Elisabel really was trying to escape from the knights, then there was a significant possibility that she would hide in the shadows of rocks or bushes to take advantage of the dark. If she’d used sleeping drugs (or something like that) to make sure she could get away, then

she probably had a plan worked out.

A worse possibility would be that she'd taken some side path and gotten lost.

I stopped in the air to look around in.

“Hoo-hoo!”

Before I had paused even for a moment, a single owl flew toward me. It hooted and then looked around. I'd been waiting for this.

Of course, it wasn't just an ordinary owl. It was a moon owl that I'd summoned using *Create Monster*, a respectable Rank 4 monster. I'd sent nine of these moon owls out to hunt. The birds boasted not only great night vision, but also keen intelligence.

I followed the moon owl and found a horse and human figure collapsed on the road. At first, I thought there was a torch, but when I looked closer I saw that a staff lit with magical flames had fallen, serving as a perfect beacon.

There was no time to worry over the details, but in this state I could have just flown by myself along the road and found her eventually.

I hurried to land and quickly approached her, confirming that the person I'd seen from above was a young, blonde girl.

Definitely the princess, but I couldn't relax. She was in a bad way.

“Urgh...”

Even with the illumination of her staff, riding hard through the night was too reckless, and she'd reaped the consequences. The horse's hoof had probably gotten caught on a rock along the curve. The white horse had spit up bloody foam, and by this point, it wasn't even twitching. The girl's limbs were twisted, her skull was cracked open, and blood soaked her form.

I remembered another horse-riding accident that had happened just a few days before and felt even worse.

By the illumination of my Staff of Wizardry, I could see the tracks where the girl had been desperately crawling, even with her broken limbs.

“H-hey,” I called out to her. “Try to hold on!”

I prayed that she was still breathing, and put my ear to her half-opened mouth.

I could hear wheezing.

It was a faint breath, but a breath all the same.

“Okay. You’re going to make it.”

The ten seconds it took me to conjure my spell felt like an eternity. Luckily, before her breath stopped, I was able to cast *Complete Recovery*.

“Huh?! A-aaahhh...!”

All the wounds across her head and fractured body closed, and her arms and legs straightened to their original form, but the shock of the accident and the fear of impending death weren’t so easily shaken.

She clung to my robe and let out a needless moan of distress. Her cute face was muddled with tears and fresh blood. It seemed like she hadn’t recognized me yet.

“It’s okay,” I consoled her. “You’re okay now.”

“Uhhhn...ahhh... Agh! Father!”

I had no choice. I hugged her trembling body and stroked her back. I ended up covered with hacked-up clots of blood that seemed to have been clogging her trachea, but I didn’t have time to worry about that.

“Ahh... Ahh... I...ahh?”

About a minute passed. The girl’s breath steadied, and I could see the light of consciousness returning in her blood-red eyes.

She also finally noticed who was holding her and stroking her back. She suddenly jumped up. “Y-you...!”

“You’re not hurt anymore,” I tried to reassure her. I struggled to sound as friendly as possible. I figured she must be deeply suspicious of me.

“Y-you are the wizard... Lord Margilus, right?”

“That’s right. I am the magic user and lord of Castle Getaeus, Geo Margilus. Are you the daughter of the duke of Filsand?”

She looked wary... Actually, she looked like she had no idea what to make of this. At least, that’s what I’d gotten from our brief interaction so far. This girl was definitely intelligent. She’d called me a wizard at our very first meeting, not a sorcerer, suggesting she might have investigated me in advance and filed the information away in her head.

“Yes...that’s right. I am Elisabel...Roney...Filsandia...” She still had a perplexed expression on her face, but she grabbed the hem of her dress and curtsied...then looked around for a moment. “Ah! No! Windstar! Windstar...! Aaah...!”

Once she noticed the still horse, she dropped to the ground and wailed. Flustered, she picked up the staff she'd dropped and checked herself over.

"So, I was thrown from Windstar...but my bones... Why am I still alive...?"

Was it her instinct as the daughter of a duke to, even now, try to keep her appearance pristine? Moving almost automatically, she took a cloth from the saddlebag on the white horse and wiped the fresh blood from her face and body.

As she did that, she seemed to be retracing her memories to try and recall the situation up to that point. "I don't have any wounds... Nor broken bones... Was it you...?"

Her beautiful face was turning pale. I nodded in response to her question.

"Yeah. You were seriously hurt. I'm sorry I didn't ask, but I healed you."

"I see..."

"Hooooo..." The young, pigtailed girl let out a long sigh, weary enough to sound like an old lady. "Lord Margilus... Why are you here?"

She didn't ask why I'd saved her. Her distrust of all men ran deep. But what concerned me most were her eyes. My aunt's eyes had looked the same way when she lost her entire family to a single accident.

I was silent.

What could I say to convince her to let me rescue her? The most ideal outcome would be if she told me everything, but unfortunately, my enhanced hearing told me that the Filsand knights were getting closer. They would likely arrive here in about five minutes.

"There's something I must tell you immediately," I said.

"What is it?"

I used my white, glowing Staff of Wizardry to gesture back toward the road from which she had come. The torches of the knights were drawing near. The girl didn't fail to notice, and looked at me with fear in her eyes. It seemed she understood that I had somewhat grasped the nature of her relationship to the knights.

“As lord of Castle Getaeus, I believe it will be beneficial to me to rescue you. If you help me, I will do everything in my power to save you.”

“Well.” She looked like she had heard a familiar song. With her long background as a diplomat, I thought it would be more believable if I used the language of political benefit to convince her, and it looked like I was right. I mean, it wasn’t a complete lie.

The only problem was...did she really want to be rescued?

As expected, Elisabel started waving her wand as if unsure. “I...”

“Hmm?”

“I have been cast away by my father and second brother. They want me dead. Until moment ago, I believed there was nothing left for me to do but die...” She continued quietly, as if talking to herself. “But...I never understood the truth of how fearful death really is.”

A wall of torches was gradually approaching. We didn’t have much time left. Behind Elisabel’s red eyes, I could see another emotion besides despair...or at least I hoped so.

“Now I know. I don’t want to die bearing my mother’s grudge, not knowing my father’s true intentions...”

“I see...”

“Hear me, Lord Wizard. To put it bluntly, I would like to propose an individual alliance.”

Of course, she didn’t completely trust me yet. But she had made the decision to use me, and be used by me, to survive. It looked like I would be taking Elisabel under my protection, and delivering her to her father, the duke of Filsand.

“I humbly accept your proposal.”

“I may not be of much use to you, but I look forward to working with you.”

She stood up straight and bowed like the lady she was.

Traces of blood still sullied her dress and hair, but she remained wholly beautiful all the same.



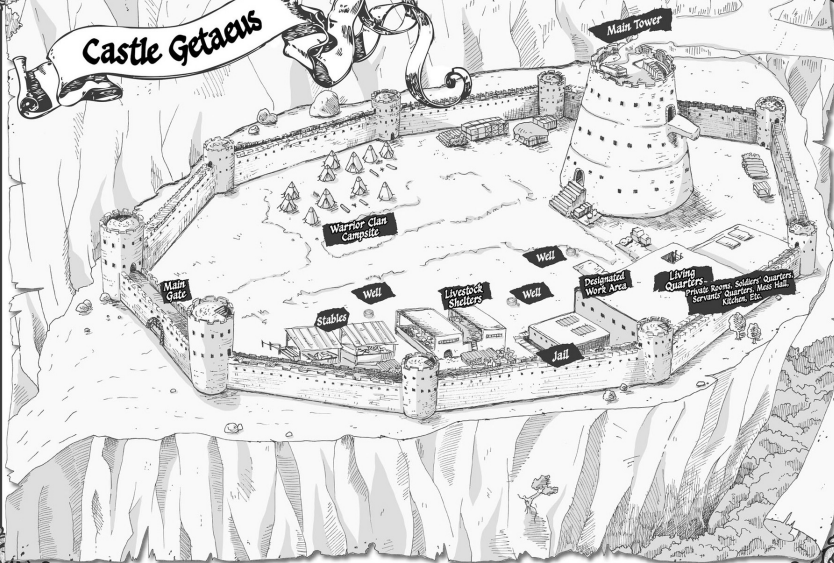
MAP OF
Castle Getaeus

Dungeons & Braves
Character Sheet

Character Name

Geo Margilus

Castle Getaeus





Afterword

IT'S BEEN A WHILE. My name is Mikawa Souhei.

Thanks to you, I had the opportunity to write Volume 2 of *Magic User*.

This time around, I think that I was able to show that the main character has grown a bit in his adventures in this other world. I was also able to include some illustrations of Castle Getaeus, where the main character now resides. As a creator, this castle is like the second main character to me, and you'll be able to see it expand and grow as work on it continues in the story.

I made an effort to revise the webnovel version of Volume 1 into something that stood well on its own for the printed light novel. I'm pleased to say that although there were good days and bad days, I think we ended up with well-balanced content.

Meanwhile, in Volume 2 (if you've already read it, you already know), I've completely done away with all limitations. Instead, I wrote it with confidence that the story would continue. Especially in the last scene. You can't wait to read what happens next, right? (At least, I hope you can't!)

My shameless hope is that I can keep on going full speed ahead with Volumes 3 and 4. When I was approached to turn this story into a book, I was pessimistic and thought I would be lucky if I could even publish one volume. But it seems there is no limit to human desire.

There were a lot of internal monologues in Volume 2, but in Volume 3, I should be able to show you more drama and major battles with evil aristocrats, daemonists, savage tribes, and the daemons themselves. I hope to also give the new characters even more to do than they had in the online version. Please look forward to it.

There are some people I need to thank.

Ryota-H for drawing such wonderful illustrations, even though I know you're so busy. I was especially moved by the strange but strong Lade and the dainty Elisabel, who could never display even an ounce of awkwardness. Editor F, I know I caused problems for you with delays during the rewrite process. Thank you for having so much patience with me. And just like last time, thank you to Tenkado NoNPolicy for the awesome maps and castle illustration designs. It's thanks to you that this world is able to grow.

Thank you to everyone who helped promote Volume 1. I hope

you will do the same for this volume, too (heh heh).

My long-time game buddies, J and Y. Next time you want to go eat BBQ, make sure you're ready to whip out some jokes and banter!

Thank you to all the readers who have supported the online version of this story. That's exactly why we've been able to make it a series! I apologize for my tendency to be delayed in updating the webnovel, but I ask for your continued support.

Finally, thank YOU, the reader, for buying this book. Thank you very much.

If you thought this story was interesting, nothing could bring me greater joy.



Thank you for reading!

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